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OR,
**PHELIM McGALLAGIN'S HARD
LUCK HUSTLE.**

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PETE," "SOFT HAND SHARP," "THE DUDE
FROM DENVER," "FRESH FRANK,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD MAN WITH A RECORD.

"No, no!" wheezed the old man, and the bare idea was enough to give him a fit of coughing that lasted for several minutes.

When he had recovered his breath somewhat and shaken his fist at the two grinning scoundrels, he added:

"You don't understand me. I would not have a hair of her head hurt—not for thousands. I am not a brute. If anything was to happen to her I believe the boy would murder you when he comes. Do not make any mistake. There is no fun in the job I am offering you."

"Excuse me, boss; but, if you leaves us ter guess, it may sp'ile ther job. You jest talk plain English, and we kin tell better what's in yer

THE STICK WHIRLED AROUND, STRIKING KING KENNEDY'S ARM AT THE ELBOW. THE PISTOL DROPPED FROM HIS HAND EXPLODING AS IT FELL.

wool. Ef you don't want ther gal ter croak, what in thunder *does* yer want? It sounded mighty much like that same."

The first speaker was an elderly man, who was evidently accustomed to an entirely different grade of society from that in which he just now found himself. Unless there was some powerful reason to stay their hands, he might have been pardoned for shrinking a little, and feeling some qualms for his own safety, for the tones in which the burly ruffians spoke were not respectful, to say the least. And they looked as if they would very cheerfully cut the throat of any man for a dollar, provided there was a chance of no immediate risk.

If the question of the rough was intended for a feeler, it brought information in a shower. There was no change in the tone of the old man; his voice was just as husky, and his form as bent, and apparently decrepit. Yet the covetous eyes that had been so wolfishly fixed on the heavy, gold watch-chain across his breast, returned to his face with something of a cringing look that the words alone could hardly account for.

"Don't undertake it, Beeker!" warned the old man; "and you, Turtle-foot, keep your hands where they belong. Not that I care for myself: it is only a warning to you. I would just as soon that you should know what sort of men you are dealing with, without your learning it at the hands of my boy. When he gives a lesson it generally kills, and I do not want to lose you. I might search a long while before I found better tools for the work that I want done. You are thinking now that you may make a surer thing by robbing me, and then going to work for some one else. Try it if you choose. There are a thousand dollars in my pocket, and if it was gone I would not dare to make an outcry about it. I am sixty years old, and feel as if I had lived a hundred."

"How did you know them names, boss?" was the hasty query. "I'll swear they never was heard at Hard Luck; ner yet anywhar else—fur more years than that camp's old. Hev I ever seen yer afore; an' whar?"

"Never mind that. It is enough that I know you thoroughly, and that I ran no risk in opening out my business to two strangers. You dare not betray me; and if you can work me any personal harm—do it."

Taunt and sneer came once too often to be borne.

"Down him!" exclaimed the one who had been addressed as Turtle-foot; and, with outstretched hands he sprung at the old man.

The distance that separated the ruffians from their victim was only a trifle, and there was no time for him to brace himself to meet the attack, draw a weapon.

Did he move at all, or had it been there all the time? Simultaneous with the onset a little cane appeared in the hands of the old gentleman. It was a slender, springy affair, that Turtle-foot would have laughed at if it had moved a shade later. In those hands, and handled as he handled it, it was no laughing matter. A little flirt and the loaded head was over Turtle-foot's guard, and against his crown. Then, the recovery landed it on the bridge of Beeker's nose, and the two men were down.

The old gentleman did not appear to think the feat anything specially to be proud of. He tucked the cane under his arm, and ascertained the time by his watch.

Turtle-foot was disposed of for the next few moments; but Beeker was just hard enough hurt to be dangerous. For a few seconds he lay devoid of motion. Then his hand went stealing toward his belt.

"You are two against one, Beeker, but there is a little life left in the old man yet, and not much in you two. Be a good boy, and take your gruel kindly. If it seems rough as it is, what would it be if I once crawled all over you? And at present I have the drop."

Wheezy, husky, and his hand trembling—though not from excitement—his eyes but dully seen through the gold-rimmed spectacles that sat across his nose, his little, lean figure shown to particular disadvantage in his loosely fitting broadcloth, he looked like a man to be crushed with one sweep of Beeker's hand.

But, Beeker had had a taste of that helplessness, and had no longer a doubt that there was both nerve and ability behind it. His hand dropped away from the revolver it had been feeling for, and he raised himself on his elbow and looked over at Turtle-foot.

"I see you hev, an' you needn't nuss it up ez fur ez Beeker goes. I guess yer one ov 'em ez kin put things 'bout ez he wants 'em. You kin consider my hands up, an' me a-shoutin'. But how much are ther matter with—Turtle-foot?"

"There is nothing ther matter with Turtle-foot except a very sore head. It will hurt him for the balance of the day, and then—I hope it will not be so far forgotten that the dose will have to be repeated."

"Don't worry, boss, over him, ef he ain't hurt wuss ner that. It needs somethin' sich like that ter git our brains workin' right. You kin see how it is yerself. We don't know a thing about you, an' you know a heap about us. Ef we were

back whar them things war the style, I should jedge thet the whisperin' ov them two names you mentioned would be mighty apt ter stir up somethin' thet would end in a hangin'-bee; an' we wouldn't be among ther mourners when it war over. We hed ter cave, or kick real hard. We tried kickin', an' now we'll cave. Honest Injun, we'll treat you squar'; an' ef you hev got a job, you kin count on me an' him ter run it through, ef it's through mud to ther hub."

"It makes no difference what I once was called—if you heard the name you might recognize it—but I have shown that I know you two, and can handle you both together. Another time I would read you the lesson in a different way, and perhaps more effectually. I am perfectly willing to have you test my word, by a personal assault at any time. So long as I need you, you need not fear for your worthless lives. My gripe is on you, and you can't get away. The only difference is that if you serve me truly we will part on what might be called friendly terms, if there is such a thing as friendship with men like you; and you will be the richer in pocket for having met me. But, if you attempt to betray me, you die at once! I don't propose to waste my time fighting you and the rest of the world as long as there are plenty of other tools lying around for the finding."

"And jest one question, boss. Why did yer pick out us instead ov some ov them thet you didn't think war jest so onreliable?"

"Because, in addition to your accomplishments, which were all that could be desired, I knew enough about you two to hang you both."

"Nothin' like a fair understandin' in ther start. Ef you hed give it to us squar' thar wouldn't hev' been no foolishness."

"Enough of this. Hereafter I shall call you by the names you have assumed in Hard Luck. I see that your amiable partner has recovered from his fit of absence of mind, and if you are ready for it we will talk business."

All this was said in the even, husky tones in which the old man had begun the conversation. A more striking difference between matter and manner could not well be imagined. It puzzled the two ruffians, who, though subdued enough, were evidently wondering what sort of man he could be. Turtle-foot had been listening to the latter part of the conversation, but he seemed to leave everything in the hands of his partner. At this he gingerly raised himself to a sitting posture and muttered:

"It all goes jest ez my pard puts it. Drive on with that same business."

"As you are aware, I am known in Hard Luck as Howard Bromwell, an invalid, lately visiting this region for the sake of my health. I quietly told you to meet me here if you wanted a job that might bring you some hard raps, though the pay would be in proportion. And I began by asking you if you had the wit and nerve to make Miss Gladys Golden disappear? You asked in response, what was I willing to give for the corpse of the young lady? Now, it may be that I will only want the man with whom she lives watched, for the other is a last resort, but I want to arrange for the entire figure at the start. If the worst comes to the worst, the lady may have to disappear, if it costs John Golden his life. As far as she is concerned, all that you are to do is to steal her away and take her to a place designated by us. When the time comes you can turn her loose, and having received your pay, go on your way rejoicing."

"An' you don't mean *her* any harm?"

"Absolutely; she is not to receive injury in any way, and if evil comes to her through you I will take payment out of your necks."

"About what does yer think we would earn, doin' a leetle job like that—ter say nothin' ov what we lost by givin' up our locate at Hard Luck?"

"About one thousand dollars if your work is done as it should be; not a cent if you willfully botch it in the least particular."

"Then it's a whack. From this time on you'll find us just the men fur yer money. Don't crowd us, an' we'll do yer good."

The two villains straightened themselves up and shook hands with each other. They hardly had the nerve to propose shaking with their employer.

Bromwell, as he had called himself, took the occasion to have a quiet little cough with himself—which he suddenly cut short, and raised his hand.

"Hist! Some one is coming. Beware how you reveal my presence here. There is your hand money. I will see you again, and instruct you how and when the job is to be done. Till then see that you keep yourselves out of other rascality. I have a long arm, and for the present intend to own you, body and soul."

Before the men could frame an answer Bromwell had vanished from the cabin where the conference had taken place.

CHAPTER II.

A DISTINGUISHED FOREIGNER AND HIS SUITE.

"Disgusting, aw, 'pon honnaw, don'chaw know."

"Av coorse Oi know; and phat's the nade to till me ag'in and ag'in? L'ave me a rist, bad

'cess to yez! An' if Phelim McGallagir wor only back wid his Bridget, it's him that wad know when he wor well off. Av ye pl'ase don't l'ane on me quoit so harrud and it's longer that Oi'll last. K'ape yer legs under ye a little stiffer, an' it's the longer we'll both last. Sure, an' it's a resting-place Oi say foninst us; an' Harrud Luck can't be so far off."

It was some little time after Bromwell had slipped out of the cabin before the two heard anything to indicate that the old gentleman had not been mistaken. In fact, Turtle-foot was just opening his mouth to relieve himself of some of the doubts that harassed him when nearing footsteps fell upon his ear.

The doubt on his face changed to wonder.

"Hanged ef that don't beat me! Ther boss must hev an ear like a pick'el. He heard 'em when they was a mile off. What sort ov a coon is he, anyhow?"

"You hold yer yawp," retorted Beeker, grumly. "He's what you kin call a blamed good man; but we don't know jest so well who this are that's a-comin'. Lay low, an' mebbe we'll find out."

So the two listened in silence, and finally the first words they heard belonged in the above conversation.

"A travelin' menadgery, by ther holy kiotes! What in smoke be they doin' here?"

"Dry up, an' you'll hev a chance ter find out. They're comin' right fur us. It's none ov their biz what we're doin' here ourselves; an' ef they ask questions I'll tell them so; but mebbe it mout be ez well not ter git up a racket tell we know ther boss are out ov hearin'."

"You lead, an' I'll foller suit, every time. Only, afore we furgit it, s'pose you show me ther top figger on that bill that same boss stuck inter yer fist. I'll trust then to a fair divide later on—an' I'll know ef we kin afford ter let biz slack tell he gits ready ter start."

The suspicion that Turtle-foot showed did not at all offend his pard. He drew out the bill from the pocket into which he had hastily thrust it, and showed the big "C" that marked its denomination.

"Good goods, an' ther right size. Ef *that's* his starter, you kin figger what we kin squeeze out when ther coin really gits ter rollin'. Now, stow it. Here they be."

On the door of the cabin, which was of considerable strength and tightly-fitting, Phelim was beating a tattoo as Beeker spoke. When the latter suddenly threw the door open, the stick with which the Irishman was pounding whacked the ostensible proprietor of the shanty over the head, causing him to stagger back with an angry imprecation.

"The top av the morning to yez. Can we rist wid yez a bit? It's me an' me lord that hez thramped ivery foot av ther way from Tourkey Bind, an' doin' av it has bruk our hearts cl'ane ontirely. Av yez had a drap av ther cr'ature to relave the necessarys av a wayfarin' mon, it wad be just too illegant. An' phot's bin goin' on? Sure, it looks loike bluddy murther."

Phelim's eyes fell upon the little puddle of blood that Beeker's nose had furnished for the floor when Bromwell dropped him, and then wandered to the face of the ruffian, as it was for the first time turned toward the light. The question hardly seemed unnatural.

"Yer looks half-white, an' ef you kin keep yer mouth shut a part ov ther time guess we kin stand you. I war jest knockin' Steve, here, fur askin' fool questions. Ef you don't want a dose ov ther same kind you don't want ter let that red rag ov yourn rattle too free. An' who ther thunder be you, anyhow; an' what are yer doin' here?"

Beeker had, as he thought, taken the measure of the strangers, and he had decided that they were not dangerous. He scowled ferociously, and flung his questions at the visitors as though he wished they would knock them down.

"Many thanks for the kindness. It's Phelim McGallagin that ye sees befront ov yez, fresh from the gr'ane owld sod. An' me frind is a dook in his own country, but here, not to make the grand excoitement, he's ownly Patrick McGinnis, at your service. We are in s'arch ov Hard Luck, an' as we have no spelter tell we get there, we have to sample the walkin'. It's nigh to stharved we are wid the walk; an' av there's anything to ate or dhrink in ther sheeling, it's remimber you we will when we foind our remittances."

"Ef you knows when you are well off you'll stay out ov Hard Luck. It's ez onhealthy a camp fur furriners ez thar is in all outdoors. They hate an Irishman, down thar, wuss nor poison—but a Englishman they jest skin alive, an' then break his bones. Waugh! I wouldn't go down thar ef I war you, not fur rocks. Fact are, it ain't no use. All yer got ter do are ter stay here ef yer wants ter see it. Steve an' me are goin' thar now; an' we'll jest tell 'em that yer here. That'll bring ther hull gang, with ropes, an' all ther rest. Oh, you kin have jest ez much fun ez you want, right here, an' save wear an' tear ov shoe leather."

"Sind thim along, thin; sure, an' it's bad company that is better than none at all, at all. Be the same token, that's the r'ayson we're sthoppin' wid you."

"Fresh is no name fur him," said Beeker, looking around at his pard. "It would be a real blessin' ter feed him a leetle salt. The other galoot now looks kind ov harmless, and as he don't open his mouth he can't be tellin' no lies. S'pose you sit down on him, like, an' watch me havin' a round ov fun with the wild Irishman before we go."

"Sit down yourself," retorted Turtle-foot; "I've tried that game with one stranger, an' I got all I want fur a week. You kin hev ther fun, an' I'll do ther loud cheerin'. My head's burtin' so I can't see ef there's one ov 'em, er a dozen."

"Then I'll take the soft one first, and see what the other one's made of when I get limbered up."

"Tare an' 'oun's, yer grace, they're going to molist us. Phat shall we do?" Phelim had looked and listened in dismay.

"Aw, disgusting, 'pon honnaw, don'chaw knaw. Fight the wascals. They seem vewy insulting."

"Whoop! Howld me, Bridget, befoor' Oi have thim kilt ontoirely! Here's for 'em. Oi'd sooner foight than ate any day!"

Beeker had proceeded in a quiet, business sort of way to prepare to get even for the thwack that he had received from the cudgel in the hands of the Irishman. From the looks of the two he did not think there would be much trouble about it; and he intended, for a part of the time, at least, to try and imagine that he was punching the head of Howard Bromwell.

For once his judgment was very badly at fault, and the wisdom of Turtle-foot showed itself to be greater than his. The wrong passenger was awake, and in motion. Phelim held his stick by the middle, twirling it around his head with a motion so swift as to be almost invisible, while, with a regular Irish yell, he sprung at the unfortunate Beeker.

It was a number one cyclone of hard knocks that came down on the head of the latter before he knew what to expect, or thought it was necessary to draw a weapon. Whack! they came, over his head and shoulders, and when he thrust his hand back to grasp at his revolver, a stinging blow on the wrist deprived it of all power, for the next few minutes at least.

Meantime, Turtle-foot did not intend to be idle, but circumstances were too strong for him. It had not taken him long to see that Phelim and his stick were antagonists by no means to be despised, and that his assistance would be in order. Only, when he had made a preliminary move, he was startled by hearing a wickedly murmured, "Weally, don'chaw knaw?"

It sounded as though there was business behind it, and when he cast a swift glance at the speaker he saw with amazement a pair of derringers covering him with no uncertain aim.

"Say, hold on thar! Be you goin' ter murder a man? Ef it's coin yer after, thar ain't a cent in this outfit, an' thar ain't no fun ner glory takin' a foul shot at a peaceable, inoffendin' cizerzen. Put it up—put it up! Ther blasted thing might go off."

The young man who had been introduced as Patrick McGinnis said nothing, but mournfully shook his head, pointed with one derringer at the combatants, while the other continued to cover Turtle-foot.

"Have yer got enough?" shouted Phelim, with a double row of taps, up and down Beeker's body. "Oi niver stroke a mon whin he throws up his fingers, an' squales. Av it's more that yez wants ther rist av it is in the same shop."

"Enough goes," grunted Beeker, who, now looking worse than ever, found himself unable to draw a weapon, come to a close, or keep up a successful resistance at long range.

"I ain't a hog, an' ef Steve, thar, won't back up his pard I'll let you go, an' settle with him."

"Back up blazes! Don't you see ther other galoot hez ther drop on me? This specurlashun ain't pannin' out wuth a cent, an' it's time fur us ter be goin' on home."

"Nixt toime don't be so free wid yer lip an' yer head won't have to pay for it. Go 'long wid yez, ye oogly spalpeens, an' nixt toime don't thry yer thricks on travelers."

The young man with the derringers nodded to Turtle-foot to show that he was consenting to the permission, and without delay the ruffians moved off, Beeker holding to the arm of his pard.

"It ain't wuth while ter try a shot when ther blood fills yer eyes clean shut; but when they come down to Hard Luck I'll have his life or bu'st a wheel," wickedly muttered Beeker. "What are they doin' now?"

Turtle-foot looked back over his shoulder.

"They're standin' at ther door ov ther shanty, an' ther Irishman are p'in'tin' a pistol ez long ez yer arm. Oh, they ain't slow. No snap-shot fur them! Ther woods are full ov bad men ter-day, an' we seem ter git left every time. I'm goin' ter go home, roll over three times, an' touch ther top ov ther stovepipe fur luck. Then I'll sleep over it, an' see ef I can't break ther streak."

"It's a hundred earned mighty quick, all the same," muttered Beeker, beginning to take a more philosophical view of things. "A feller

that got ther most ov ther sluggin' ort ter git ther most ov ther coin."

"Ask ther boss 'bout it, an' see how he sez it goes. 'Pears ter me he sed suthin' 'bout not gittin' inter outside rackets; but ef he's satisfied, I'm willn'."

Beeker relapsed into a grum silence after this hint, and the two plodded slowly on toward Hard Luck, which was not more than a mile distant.

Left to themselves by this ignominious retreat, the victors looked around them. So far they had not penetrated the cabin, but, having cleared the way by force of arms, they at once proceeded to take possession.

"Sure, an' Oi don't belave they belonged here at all, at all," surmised Phelim, after a glance at the desolate interior.

"It's desarted that it looks; an' whoy wouldn't we be afther sittin' down here our own silves, wid a pig in ther corner, an' a bed wid a joog undther it, what foiner would yer Grace be wantin'?"

"Aw, 'pon honnaw, disgusting, don'chaw knaw?"

"His Grace," after looking around, delivered his opinion with a heartiness that evidently came from the depth of his soul.

"Disgoostin' er not, it's the bist we kin do, an' the pig an' ther joog may kim afther a while. The nixt thing is briakfast."

Phelim had dropped a haversack outside; now he went out to find it, and on the threshold met about the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

CHAPTER III.

DOWN TO THE RESCUE.

THE eyes of the Irishman fairly started out of his head at the unexpected sight. For the moment he was too much surprised to notice that the girl was panting as though from a hard run, and that her eyes had behind their steady bravery a terror that she could not conquer.

For a brief space they faced each other—the girl evidently surprised at meeting a total stranger.

"Who are you?" she asked at length, recovering her breath and her self-possession at the same time.

"Phelim McGallagin, at yer service; but if it's his Grace, ther dook, yez wants, sure he's joost widin'."

"I do not understand you; but I suppose that can make no difference. It is help that I want. I thought Ben Holton was here, and I know he would have come with me. You will, I am sure. It is a life that is at stake."

"Sure, you n'adn't ashk twice. McGallagin is riddy, an' the dook moight as well go along. Is it a bit ov a ruction that's on hand? An' how fur till the fun begins?"

"No, no! It is a life that is at stake, I tell you. Perhaps it is all over by this time. Make haste, I say. And if there is any one else here, bring him too. It will take strength, and Ben Holton was as strong as two of you."

The girl had recovered her breath, and spoke with less effort, also with less steadiness. It was as though she had partially forgotten some dreadful sight, which now came back to her.

Phelim gave a keen look into her face, to make sure that there was no deception, and then turned toward the cabin. At his back, however, the "dook" was already standing, and the Irishman took his answer from his eye, wasting no time in attempting to explain the position.

"L'ade on, me girrul, an' there'll be two men behind yez."

It was scarcely possible that there could be anything like a trap behind this, and yet, Phelim did give one suspicious glance at their guide, as she sped away in advance, never waiting to explain why help was so urgently needed.

After a little her pace quickened into a run; and she only looked back once, to make sure that the men were following her. Evidently she had recovered from her first exertions, and now ran lightly and easily.

The ground had an upward slope, and her course was away from the trail. Whither she was going and to what she was taking them was conjecture. It might be an accident, or it might be a murder. Phelim kept his glances in front of her, and his companion followed exactly in his wake. If there was any danger in the way McGallagin was expected to see it, and evidently did not intend to be caught napping.

They had not gone over a quarter of a mile when the girl stopped suddenly and pointed downward.

"There, look!" she exclaimed. "He still is living; help him if you can."

Then she gave what was intended for an encouraging shout, bending down to peer over a sheer precipice, as Phelim halted at her side.

They stood upon the brink of a narrow canyon, so smoothly cut down the mountain-side that its existence would not be suspected by a stranger until he had reached it. At that spot it might have been possible for the girl to have lured one of the men, if not both to destruction, had she been so minded. Just there a careless walker could easily step off into eternity.

Phelim, careless, rattlepated as he seemed to be, had to repress a shudder as he looked down-

ward, into the depth of the chasm. He had already guessed at the nature of the accident that had taken place, and wondered if his aid could be of any real service, and how it could be given.

Sure enough a man had gone over the brink—and had not been dashed to pieces by the fall. It was a chance that would not have happened once in a thousand times—if it could ever have happened again.

No living soul could have gone down until he struck those jagged rocks at the bottom, and have lived long enough to have told how he happened to fall.

Fortunately this man had not gone to the bottom. Half-way down was a scrubby oak, that grew outward and upward from the side of the precipice, just where a narrow ledge of rocks, hanging on to the wall, had some day given an acorn a chance to roll down to the scant soil that filled a crevice. The tree had taken good root there—and it needed it, to support, as well as it did, the shock it received when it caught the dropping man, who now lay in a tangled coil around one of its limbs, never moving, or seeming to hear the cry that the girl had flung down to him.

"He lives!" cried the girl, turning anxiously to Phelim.

"I feared that by this time he had given up. Just as he lay when I found him; but, after a little, he turned his face upward and nodded. Oh, if I had only had help then! If he falls now—it would kill me. Quick! Waste no time! I must go down, since I am the lightest. You and your friend can certainly draw him up. I might have saved him myself if I could have fastened the rope."

"Disgusting!" interrupted Phelim's master, friend, or whatever he might be. He had taken in the situation and evidently was not pleased with it. It was not only work but danger that was being proposed to them. The rock on which they stood was as smooth as a floor, and there was not a projection or a crevice, even, at which they might brace their feet.

"I found him there and ran to the cabin for the rope. If he could only have used it! But he is so hurt or caught that he cannot. Then I ran for Holton. I hoped that he was in his shanty, and it was my only chance."

While she spoke the girl was arranging the rope under her arms, tying it with a bow-knot that could be easily loosened. Now she looked at the two men, as if she had just realized that she was about to intrust her life into their keeping.

"You will not fail me, will you? I am taking the greater risk. If—well—if anything should happen, you can always let go, and save yourselves."

"Sure, an' we'll doie together, if n'ade be," answered Phelim, grasping the coil of rope and passing a turn to his companion. Before they had time to arrange anything more the girl had gathered her skirts around her and was slipping over the brink.

There was no going back now, even if any one had desired it. All that the two men could do was to brace themselves and pay out the rope. They could not even see what they were doing without more risk than they cared to take.

"Lower away wid her ontill ye hear her shout, an' then Oi'll give a chance for yez to look over. If she's bound to save him she ain't as mad as she moight be. It's a sthrong cord an' two good min at this end av it. Av it breaks our hearts phot d' yez think's ther f'ale-in's av ther chap at ther wrong side?"

"Disgusting, aw, don'chaw knaw?"

"You bit!" responded Phelim, with a hard, short laugh, but little like his own. The answer hit the mark pretty fairly.

Neither man neglected his duty, however. Cautiously the rope was payed out, and slowly the girl descended. When she was so near the motionless man in the tree that she could touch him she gave a glance upward, and saw a face peering at her for an instant, and then withdrawn. At the same time the motion of the rope ceased, and she turned all her attention to the business in hand.

If she had not been perfectly cool she might have done more damage just then than could have been remedied. Broken necks and mashed bones cannot be set or healed by the best of good intentions. It really seemed as though the addition of a pound of weight to the bent and shivered branches would have finished the work, and sent the man downward, to be finished below.

For the first time the girl comprehended the reason of his remaining so motionless. The branch that had broken his fall had proved unable to sustain his weight, and had he not caught at another bough that brushed within his reach as he came he would have crashed on downward.

As it was, he came perilously near going to his death. The branch on which his body rested was broken almost entirely through; the slender one to which his fingers clung with the tenacity of a death gripe, seemed not only ready to slip from his grasp, but to be almost parting from the trunk at the point where it joined it above the larger limb. Both hung downward in such

a way that there was no possible chance for him to reach the body of the tree. The little limb would not sustain him, and if he loosened his hold on it, the larger one was ready to go. He was powerless to help himself in the least, and could only hold on with the grasp of grim death, balancing his weight between the two, all the time assured that if he ever forgot himself for a moment, or lapsed into insensibility, or attempted to ease the strain on his hands, or the awful numbness of his limbs, the end would come at once.

All this the girl took in as she swung near him, examining the situation.

"Can you hold out a few moments, so that I can be sure of my work?" she asked, though unable to see the face of the man, who was, so far as she could determine, a perfect stranger.

"An hour, if the tree will!" came back the muttered answer, as though he was afraid that a loud word might hasten the calamity.

"How can I best help you?"

"How many above?"

"Two—neither of them large men."

"Can you reach me without putting any strain on these limbs? They will not stand another pound. If you can, try and get your rope around me, so that I will not fall, and then scramble to that ledge, while I work my way back. If you could fasten the cord to the tree first it would be safer. If I should drop, it would be apt, otherwise, to pull you and the men above overboard, and we'd all take the chute together."

The girl looked upward, and saw that she was being watched. She waved her hand; pointed; and at the same time briefly called out what it was that she wished to do. A nod showed that she was understood, and she set about her work.

Fortunately, the branches, when they gave way, swung in quite close to the wall, and the loose end of the rope was long enough for her to work with. There was a risk, but she took it—and drew a long breath in spite of her own situation, when she succeeded. With a sharp little fling she had cast the rope over the body of the man, just where it projected beyond the branch on which it rested. The end of the cord swung toward her, as, with feet braced against the wall, she leaned out, almost at full length, and she caught it with a certain grasp.

"It is all going well," she said, as she made a running noose, and cautiously tightened it around the man.

"Another moment and I will be in safety; and now you will be in no danger, unless from the falling limb. When I have the rope fastened perhaps I can see some other way to help you."

While she spoke she was climbing upward again, to reach the little ledge, and the trunk of the tree. When she had gained these she gave a sharp tug or two at the rope, from which the strain above was now removed.

"Drop the end to me," she called as Phelim looked over.

"It is better and safer to go down than up, and if he proves too weak to help himself I can lower him."

CHAPTER IV.

A CLOSE THING OF IT.

THERE was no need for further explanation. There was a cry of warning, and then the rope was cautiously dropped.

It landed squarely on the tree trunk, and hung there without any shock being given to the girl, who had been bracing herself to receive one.

The danger was not entirely over, even yet; but the strain was lifted from every one save the man in the tree; and he could hardly come to serious harm unless the branches should give way, and catch him as they fell. Very carefully was the rope fastened to the tree, leaving just enough of slack to enable the prisoner to work.

Up to this the man had never turned his head, or attempted to see what was being done. All his energy was simply centered on keeping his balance, and after his few suggestions, he gave no more sign that he was interested in the matter. Now, he suddenly began to act.

With one hand he caught the rope, and then rolled off the heavier limb, at the same time that he loosened the hold of his other hand, and with his feet drawn up to meet the shock that he knew must follow, dropped a foot or so, and then swung in toward the rocks.

What followed showed how narrowly he had escaped death. Relieved of his weight the larger limb swung upward a trifle; but the other went down as suddenly as if it had been lopped off with the stroke of an ax.

Fortunately the man was fairly from under it, and only a few small branches brushed him as they went by. Then he was hanging a senseless mass of humanity, against the rock; dangling in a way that frightened the anxious watcher who had risked so much to save him, and who for the moment feared that she had failed at last, until she recognized the fact that the man, in spite of his nerves of steel, had fainted.

The best thing under the circumstances was to get on *terra firma* as soon as possible. There

was enough of the rope, and to spare, to reach to the bottom of the gulch, or canyon, if the muscles of the girl could stand the strain upon them after the wear and tear of the excitement just undergone. It was not every man, even, that could have kept cool on such a perch, with nothing to do but to clamber down with the aid of a slender rope. To lower a senseless man, and then follow without loss of time, was worse still.

She wasted no time in trying to dodge the issue, but swiftly took a turn around the tree with the rope, undid the knot, and then slowly allowed it to slip around the trunk, paying it out with a skill and a care that showed that she understood her business.

It did not take long. Easily the man touched the rocky bed, that had come so near to being his death. Then, without delay, the girl fastened the rope, swung herself off the ledge with an utter fearlessness, and slid downward. Rapidly as she went she had her motion always under control, and when within a few feet of the ground she sprang lightly over the body beneath her, and turning, bent downward and felt the pulse of the man.

As she had expected, life answered the question of her fingers by a faint pulsation, and it was more than likely that in a few moments he would be himself again, without further aid from her.

She looked around with the air of one who knew something about the spot. There was a thread of water a few yards away, the overflow from a spring that came out from the rock; but she had no cup or way to carry it save in her hands. She was bareheaded herself, and the man was hatless. She hesitated, looked at him again; then ran to the water, and came back with what she could bring in her two hands. Not very much, but enough to moisten his lips and wet his forehead.

Thus engaged she neither heard the sound of approaching footsteps, or noticed that the two men who had aided her in the rescue were again at hand. At her shoulder Phelim unexpectedly appeared.

"Is it poison him that you wad be afther? Sure, phat's water to a dyin' man? It's the cr'athure that he's wantin'—ther r'ale, owld, r'iginal backbone—to bring him to his bearin's."

Phelim held up a flask that gurgled mellowly as he shook it. The girl drew aside and allowed him to step forward, which he did without hesitation.

The result justified his assertion. A few drops of the ardent had a wonderfully reviving effect; and the capacity for absorption increased so rapidly that Phelim turned aside in some dismay, and applied the bottle to his own lips. He would have undoubtedly drained it if his companion had not interrupted.

"Phelim! Disgusting, don'chaw know?"

"Thru' fur you. Leddy's first, an' if she don't n'ade it, thin it's hersilf that ought to. Dhrink d'ape, me darlint. It's harmliiss as milk, an' will do you good."

The advice was not untimely, as the girl understood. She touched the flask to her lips, and though taking but a single, small swallow, the dose was the medicine she just then required. Now that she was no more needed, she had begun to tremble and grow faint herself.

Phelim received the flask again with due gravity, passing it on to the legitimate owner, and once more turned his attention to the reviving patient.

"The villains!" was the first exclamation that came from the mouth of the latter, as he partly raised himself from his recumbent position.

"Kill me if you can, but you will find that the old man dies hard."

His hand moved around as if in search of a weapon, and if the strength had been there to answer to the instinct there might have been slaughter done before there was time for explanation. Fortunately the hand wandered slowly, and failed at once to find what it had gone in search of. Before the long, lean fingers could clasp the stock of the revolver that was at his hip the voice of the girl had called him to his senses.

"Be still for a moment or two, and try and collect your thoughts. No one here would harm you. On the contrary, if you will just think a moment I believe that you will understand that we have all shown that we were very good friends."

"Ah, yes. You are right. Now I remember. It was terrible to hang there, and think that there could be no escape. I was certain that when my hands unloosened, or I made an unguarded motion, death must follow. How did you come to find me? And what sort of a woman are you? You risked your life, and showed a nerve and a strength that I did not think was in the sex."

"I did nothing that any man with the same strength would not have been ready to attempt for me. If I had not been reasonably sure that I could save you, if I could reach you, I would have shut my eyes and gone away, or left it in the hands of these gentlemen entirely. Remember, that without them I could have done nothing;

and without me I am afraid they would have failed. You see," she added, with the nearest approach to a laugh that she could muster, "I intend to claim full credit for everything that I have done."

"Or to divert my mind from the peril I have just escaped? It is not necessary. I will acknowledge that I have just been playing what the world calls 'the woman,' but it was my body, and not my nerves that gave way. If I thought for a year about my perch up there, it would not give me another tremor. I hope it is the same with you. Will you trust me with your name, so that I can always remember to whom I have been so greatly indebted?"

"Gladys Golden is my name," she responded, slowly, and gazing somewhat wistfully into his face. "If I judge you rightly by your appearance, you will not care to remain very long near the scene of what might have been a great disaster, and when you have once left this spot you will not care to recall it or any of its belongings. With some it might be different, but I am sure you are one of those who can control their thoughts, and, if so, why should you be willing to think of such surroundings as these, and the things that have occurred here?"

"Gladys Golden?" he said thoughtfully, and looking her calmly in the face. "If I were allowed I might prophesy also. You are so far superior to your surroundings that I cannot believe you will long be buried here. As for myself, I am a man known as Howard Bromwell, and I have wandered to Hard Luck, seeking to benefit my health. I was taking a stroll and allowed my wits to go wool-gathering. The next thing I knew I was falling. I expected to be dashed to pieces; but the friendly tree that received me is only a specimen of the luck I have met with, all along through life. I am here alive, and no bones broken; but it has been the worse for the tree. And now, allow me to present my thanks to these gentlemen. I am not at all unmindful that without them it would have doubtless fared very ill with me."

He spoke with an air of dignity, and held out his hand with something like courtly grace. Certainly, this was no wandering prospector, accustomed only to the rude ways of the camps of the mountains.

Phelim was nearest, and so it was Phelim that took his hand first.

"Long loife ter yer Honnor, an' it's no thanks to us that are comin', at all. It's the dook an' mesilf that wor thropin' it toward Hard Luck, an' wor a-ristin' by ther road, when the fay-male, bliss her purthy oyes, called us to ther rescue. Phat sort av men wad we have bin av we had not come? Oi'll shake, but it's wid joy only, to be afther knowin' a jontleman loike yerself."

He clasped the hand affectionately while he spoke, and gave it a series of shakes that bid fair to wring the arm out of its socket. Then he passed the gentleman to his companions, who languidly extended his hand:

"Aw, thanks, 'pon honnaw, don'chaw knaw."

The drawl scarcely rose higher than a murmur, but was sufficiently audible to be understood. Bromwell heard, but it did not seem to excite his curiosity. He turned back to Phelim, who was willing and able to talk for both.

"Among friends, Oi might say that, av this jontleman is known as Patrick McGinnis, it is ownly timporary, an' fur the prisint. At home he's the dook—"

"Phelim! Disgusting, aw, don'chaw knaw."

"Sure, an' it's ther way wid me. Oi wor goin' to spake his name, an' he *incog.* all the toime. Av ye mates him in Hard Luck remember to call him McGinnis, an' no harrum will be done."

"I suppose the trail to the camp cannot be very distant. I confess I have no idea how far from it I wandered, but I know that I should be thinking of returning. I presume, since you gentlemen were able to make your way down, it will be possible for us to scramble up, out of this gulch. That suspension has taken a good deal of the strength out of me, and I am sixty years old this summer; but I am hard to kill."

"A few hundred yards from here there is a practicable route," interposed Gladys. "It passes near the little cabin where my father and I are at present dwelling. Fortunate for you that I was able, from there, to hear the shouts that you gave. I was alone when the sounds reached my ears, and somehow knew at once what had happened. The rope may hang there for the present; I can come for it some other time. Follow me, and if you desire to rest, the cabin is at your service."

"An' sure av ye wad be wantin' that same in a hurry, it's moighty onconvaneant it moight be to git it. Oi'll have it down for ye in a jiffy. It's long enough ter r'ache twice ther distance."

Without waiting for reply, Phelim began to scramble up the rope. There was some hard climbing to be sure, but after what the girl had done the task did not seem as arduous as it really was, and Howard Bromwell did not care to linger to see it accomplished. He turned away to leave the spot, and Gladys went with him.

It did not take long to reach the ledge where the oak grew, to loosen the knot, and to simply

double the rope around the trunk. Then Phe-lim slid down, with a carelessness that showed he had no fears, separated the ends when he found that the cord lacked half a dozen feet of reaching the ground, and dropped, holding the one end still in his hand.

"Fur an empty stomach that's glory widout rayson. Sure, an' we'll lit ther jontleman do his courthin', an' we'll go back to bri'kfast. If some dirty dog hez put his nose in our haversack, it's dished we'll be onthirely. An' phot wor yez afther thinkin' av, Misther Brom-well?"

"Disgusting, don'chaw know."

"Hit it ther foorst clathor. But barrin' that same bri'kfast, it's moighty little we have to stale; an' he's too owld fur ther girrur, so Oi won't bother. Come on wid yez. We kin l'ave the rope there, where it kin be found."

A nodded assent was sufficient answer. Phe-lim threw down the neat coil that he had been making, and the two started to seek the shanty they had appropriated, carefully avoiding the cabin where Gladys Golden lived.

CHAPTER V.

MR. KEMP ASKS SOME QUESTIONS.

BILL KEMP—"Dandy Bill," as he was commonly called—came surging into "The Red Paint Saloon," after his usual hurricane style, and without much delay, and certainly, without a glance at the crowd, called up the house to join him at the bar.

The assembly at the "Paint Pot," as the establishment was also called, was generally large, but not always select. A general invitation, which was always enthusiastically answered, swept up all sorts of men to huddle along the stout counter that extended across one end of the room, without a break.

No one supposed that Dandy Bill had anything in his wool when he extended the invitation; and the "Hyer's to yer," of the score or more who were in the line dropped out as heartily as the gentleman could wish to hear. Nevertheless, Bill, who stood at the end of the line, and with his side to the bar so that he faced them all, allowed his eyes to rove along in an unobtrusive but thorough way that took in every countenance.

"All old settlers, eh, boys?"

"That's about what they call us."

The answer came from the dozen nearest to the gentleman in the lead and he smiled as he received it. They looked like old settlers, and not very prosperous ones, either.

"Anybody hear anything of a mighty chief, just at Hard Luck, looking for some one to devour? Am I sure he's not here now? I heard he was on the way, and according to the figures he ought to be here by this time. I've been all over town trying to catch his trail, but he don't show up worth a cent; and I begin to believe, if nothing happened to him along the road, that he got scared the first sight he had of the boys and took the back track. If he should turn up, any man here that meets him, and pretends to be a friend of Dandy Bill, wants to steer him my way, and don't you forget."

"What's he like? Who is he? Where is he coming from?"

Half a dozen men delivered themselves of the same list of questions, at the same time. It was no more their curiosity that made them speak than the desire to show proper deference to the man who was a, if not the, chief in the town.

"They tell me that he's little but good; and that an angel from 'way back couldn't say in just what sort of shape he will come in. When he strikes a camp he makes the fur fly, and that's the way you find him out. He's come down to these regions for coin, of course, and he's open to make it in 'most any way that is handy, and shows a chance for a sport to get in his work. Down at Halcyon they called him Snapshot Sam; but he may have a dozen other names. When he opens his layout at Hard Luck it will probably be something else."

"And how are we going to know when he gets here? There's lots of strangers' wagons along this way, and if we keep on a back seat for all of them we'll be missing some holy old chances, and may as well shut up shop till he's come and gone."

"Don't be fresh, Reube. I'm just giving you all a hint that this one man is my meat; but if you want to tackle him before he gets around to me, I'm not kicking. He'll have so much more boodle, and so much less luck. Just keep an eye out for little strangers, and if they begin to branch out as though they were high rollers, don't sit down on your hind legs and howl, but, if I haven't dropped to him yet, come and whisper the facts in the tip of my pict'rful ear. I'm not shouting this all over town, but down here at the Shop. I count on you all, and I want to give you the pointer besides."

If it had been any one but Dandy Bill that gave the pointer, it might not have been quite so well received. Kemp knew, as well as could be, that there were some of the toughest cases in town around him—men who sometimes laid for flush strangers, and cleaned them out in a way that was not considered orthodox, even at the Paint Shop. They, and he, understood this

was a warning to keep hands off until the chief had his fling.

There were two men who received the intelligence with rather mixed feelings, and looked at each other as though they could talk if they wanted to, but were not so sure that it was the best they could do. In Hard Luck they were known as Buck Banker and Steve Lindsay. They have already been introduced to the reader as Beeker and Turtle-foot.

Buck gave his pard a nudge and sidled out of the crowd.

"Reckon we met ther high-flyin' sport our own blessed selves, eh, pard?"

"That's what they call him."

"But which one were him? Ther' war two ov 'em, an' neither war ez big ez a horse."

"I'll never tell. Ther Irishman war handy with his stick, but the way that the dude dropped on me with his shooters was just too lovely fur anything."

"I reckon that same dude must be a fraud; an' ef he's playin' off, what's ther matter with his bein' this Snapshot Sam?"

"That's a fact; an' mebbe you ain't achin' ter see him in town jest so bad ez you war? Ef he's Dandy Bill's meat, that's jest ez good, an' a heap sight safer."

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no—ef he kerries rocks. Ef we hed bin goin' fur keeps in ther start, whar would be hev bin?"

"An' whar would we hev bin? Ther long an' short ov it are, that we hev dropped onter ther man that Dandy Bill wants ter find; an' we kin make a pint ef we tell. What's ther matter with tellin', then?"

"All right. Tellin' goes. Ef we're goin' ter give the hull yarn—ez we better would—we want ter know what we war doin' thar; an' then call Bill out. We ain't appearin' any too bright in ther hist'ry, an' so thar's no use ter shout it out to ther rest ov ther camp."

"Bill knows that Holden hez bin missin' fur a week, an' ef we think ov squattin' in this shack, it ain't nobody's say-so but ourn. Give him ther wink, an' we'll see what he thinks ov ther lay-out."

As Kemp did not intend to make a long stay, there soon occurred the chance that the two men were looking for. When the sport moved toward the door Baker was able to whisper, unobserved by the crowd, that he had something to say if Bill would wait a moment on the outside. Then they waited until he had time to get a little distance from the door before they left the room.

The dandy sport was lighting a cigar as they came up to him, a few yards from the door, and he looked over his match in the most unconscious way imaginable.

"Oh, it's nothin' that would break us up ef it got out, but a feller don't care ter tell a story afore too many ov a gang when he's purty sure thet ther laugh will be ag'in' him, an' he no chance ter kick."

"In other words you want to tell me how you got that belt on the nose. I don't see where I come in, but drive on, anyway."

"That's about ther size ov it, an' I guess I wouldn't be shoutin' 'round ef you hadn't bin askin' questions. I kin tell you whar we left ther man that give me ther whack, an' then, mebbe, you'll know somethin' 'bout Snapshot Sam."

An encouraging word from the sport brought the rest of the story, though, of course, there was nothing said about the meeting with Howard Bromwell.

"Good boys," said Kemp, when he heard how easily the two men had been handled. "I owe you one for giving me the nod, even if it amounts to nothing. From what you say they must be good men, though they had you so far off your guard that there is no telling how they would have done with the chances even. But what has become of them? You are sure that you didn't go back afterward, and get away with them?"

"Go back nothin'. We had enough right thar. They talked as though they might be down to hard-pan, an' ef they wer'n't throwin' off they might hev camped right thar tell they could see how ther land lay. Ef I are not bad mistook, you'll see them in Hard Luck ter-night, lookin' fur ther stamps. An' I'm bettin' they find 'em, too. They look that kind."

"Good enough, as far as it goes; but if they are on their uppers, so to speak, I don't know that I care to see them till later. I can't exactly swallow that, though. They got away with the Turkey Bend sports to the tune of a couple of thousand, and they ain't the sort to put their wealth in the bank as they gather it in. It's a dodge, like as not, and they think they will play it on Hard Luck mighty fine. Perhaps the Turkey Benders are after them for that foolishness with Dave McGee. If Dave is dead, there might be the shadow of a rope in the distance."

Dandy was nibbling thoughtfully at his cigar while he reflected aloud. The presence of the men bid not trouble him at all, if indeed he had not forgotten it.

"Then there were two of 'em?" inquired Buck, who was not more modest than the average reporter when there was intelligence to be obtained.

"Not that I heard of, but all the same, there must have been. That sort of man generally prefers to work in double harness. Sometimes he leaves his pard in the bushes for a while, but he's all ready to turn up at the right time. I suppose that you will not want to say anything about your little adventure, so it's no use to tell you not to mention it, and we can lay back and watch how the cat jumps when the sport gets to town."

"Ef you don't whisper it we won't whimper. I did count on gettin' even, somehow, but after what you say my figgers ain't ez large ez they was, an' you kin have him. I don't want him ez much ez I did. Ef he got away with Dave McGee he's a shade over my pile. So long. Ef we strike anything furdur we'll let you know."

Although it was long after sundown there were plenty of persons on the street, and Banker, though there were some other questions he would have liked to ask Dandy Bill, while he had the chance, suspected that the sport would not care to be seen long in his company, and withdrew before he got the hint that might not be long delayed in coming.

For some moments after being left alone Kemp stood, busy with his own reflections.

The sound of a light footstep caused him to turn quickly, though why he should have fancied that there was any danger at hand, and throw his hand into his bosom, was a conundrum perhaps he could not have answered.

A smile curled his lips, however, as he caught the outlines of a feminine figure that he recognized at a glance. He knew of none other like it in the camp.

"Ah, that you, Myrtle! It's a little late, is it not? Have to hustle and run for it if you want to get to the Odeon on time. I'm going that way, and if you don't object I'll see you safe, and we can talk as we go along. Anything wrong?"

"The street is broad, and if you chose to take one side of it I might take the other; but for talking, I don't see how we are to manage. Don't trouble yourself, Mr. Kemp. I can get along very well without any assistance."

"Pray, do curb that temper of yours. It will get you into trouble yet. And it's not at all good for you to go on the stage when you are excited. The fact is, it's not a good place for you, anyhow; and I think I can name at least a better. Think it over again, little woman, and next time give me a yes for an answer."

CHAPTER VI.

AN ACCIDENT AT THE ODEON.

THE Odeon was the pride and glory of Hard Luck, and was coining money for Ed Buckle, its proprietor.

It was by far the largest building in the town, and its patrons generally found something that would suit all tastes, however diverse they might be.

One-half of the ground floor was partitioned off as a sort of theater. At one end was quite a good-sized stage, on which light theatrical and variety entertainments were given at times; and as the benches were easily moved, the body of the room was also used as a dance hall on such occasions as it was needed.

Two other good-sized rooms took up the rest of the building, the one being for the bar, while the other was reserved for those who wished to pursue Dame Fortune through the medium of cards and lay-out.

Hard Luck was a brisk mining-town, in which the toilers were doing well, and were of the kind to pay for their recreation while the streak lasted. There were plenty of hawks, who were also doing well; and they were prodigal of their money. Besides these was the floating population, that brought in a good deal of wealth, and left it behind them when they drifted out again, no one having asked them how it had come into their possession, so that it had not been filched out of Hard Luck pockets. Sometimes bad men from abroad drifted in and took the town, but as they generally paid their way at the bar, and were lavish patrons of the stage, Buckle did not so much object to their coming, and continued to make his profit, right along.

Miss Myrtle Mead was the best card that he had ever had.

He was not entirely certain that her appearance at the Odeon was not her first on any stage; but, whether or not she had ever before appeared in public, she understood what she undertook, and went through her performance on the tight-rope, the trapeze, or with the bars, with the certainty and grace of an experienced actor. So far, nothing had ever happened to her, though as much could not be said for his patrons, who had, at one time or another, mostly lost their hearts to the dashing damsel of the stage.

Miss Mead was coy and cold, however, and one after another the luckless swains recovered the misplaced articles, and each one, seeing that no one else had anything to boast of, came to consider himself the lady's solid friend.

As for Mr. Kemp, he had not openly entered the lists, but had been quietly following up the game with more persistence than any of the rest, and though so far the results obtained had not amounted to much, he had no idea of giving

up. To do him justice, he had not thought of waylaying the girl when he lingered on the street, but when the chance for a little conversation presented itself, he was glad to take advantage of it. From his words it can be seen that this was not the first time that he had attempted confidential discourse.

Miss Myrtle was not a particle excited, in spite of what he said; and there was just the usual amount of ice in her tone as she answered:

"I did think, Mr. Kemp, that you understood the meaning of the word impossible, when I gave it to you. That is all the answer I can give you if I thought it over for ever so long, and if you were wise you would not desire to hear it more than once. My aunt was unable to accompany me this evening, but I have no doubt that by to-morrow she will be better. The men of Hard Luck have always treated me with respect, and I have no fear of any one molesting me. In any event, I believe that I am able to protect myself. Certainly, any escort that you could give me would only be to invite future trouble."

Myrtle spoke in a low tone, and continued to hurry along. As Kemp had suggested, she was late already, and had no time to waste. The sport gave no evidence that the rebuff had angered him, and as he kept easily by the side of the young lady, without altering his ordinary, swinging gait, it did not seem very likely that she would succeed in dropping him before reaching the Odeon, which was not now very far off.

"So far you have been only dealing with the boys of the camp, and one keeps the other in shape. Any of us would see that you come to no harm, because we believe that you are a square little woman, trying to do about what's right. But if you don't know the danger you may strike at any time, then you're not half as wise as I think you are. There are some sports who, if they once chipped in, would never draw out till they raked the pot, or went dead broke. I'm something of that style myself; but I play with my hands on the board, and don't calculate on using any advantages on a woman. When one of these bad men turns up you have something else. I have heard that there was one of them with his eye your way. Keep your own eyes open, and when you find that you do need him, call on Dandy Bill."

If he had anything more to say there was no time for it, since they reached the front of the saloon. With a courteous lift of his hat, Kemp turned away, while Myrtle went on toward the side entrance.

There was a door on the main street for the benefit of the audience, and another between the hall and the bar-room by which the majority of the spectators entered. When Kemp passed through the door of the saloon he saw that it was more than ordinarily well filled. A second glance told him that there were more than the usual number of strangers—men that he had never seen before, though he thought he was acquainted with all or nearly all the sports of the region, who would be apt to land at the Odeon. Among all these strangers the particular sport that he had been inquiring for at the Paint Shop might well be hid, and taking stock of Hard Luck at his leisure.

As this was a night for performances on the stage, the lay-out had not been spread in the room devoted to chance, and with the exception of a few summer games, to while away the time, the poker tables were tenantless of players, though a few men sat around them, chatting. The greater part of the crowd was about the section of the room immediately in front of the bar; and though that was what Ed generally wanted, it was getting his audience pretty well primed before the performances began.

"Hello, sport. Ain't you going through your horses with rather a rush?" exclaimed a tall, handsome-looking man, as Kemp made his way forward, unconscious of being in more than ordinary haste. It was the way he always went, and in Hard Luck no one not a stranger would have noticed it.

The question was asked carelessly enough, but Dandy recognized it as a challenge at once, though he gave no sign, and his smiling face lost none of its genial look, as he cast a glance shoulderward.

"Rush goes, if you want to call it that. The bell's a-ringing, and reserved seats are mighty high at the Odeon. Where a fellow goes every night that she runs he's generally satisfied to take a chance on the ground floor, but he wants to get there just as soon as the doors open. One drink may be in order, yet; but after that the faster you hustle around the more you will see of the show. You can join me if you choose; or do the other thing if you'd sooner. Hard Luck is mighty accommodating, and I'm always considered one of its prophets."

Kemp spoke a little more at length than it was usual for him to do, as he was dealing with a stranger, and was not yet altogether certain of the programme. It might be that the stranger only meant a joke; but it looked more as though he was there for a difficulty—why, was perhaps a question worth solving, since this man scarcely looked like the kind of tough that is

in the habit of announcing himself as a chief in every camp that he comes to, even if nine times out of ten he has to look for a back seat shortly thereafter.

"Oh, if you're one of the dollar-a-head men, scramble past. From the style you were slinging I thought you must be a regular highbinder, that was treading on people's toes on purpose. Get your drink, pard, and then we can afford to go into the house together. I'll wait on you, and maybe you'll point out your chiefs here as they arrive."

"My friend," said Kemp, suddenly changing his tone, "I didn't recognize you when I spoke or I would have raised my hat. Sorry that your finances are not in more flourishing condition, and that mine are only a trifle better shaped. Tell you what I'll do: We'll toss up and see. If I win I'll pay for both drinks; and if you win we won't take any at all. That will save our pile till after the show is out; and by that time maybe you can make a raise."

"Good enough," answered the stranger, flipping a coin into the air. "Heads or tails?"

"Tails it must be," responded Bill.

"And tails it is," said the man, as they bent down over the twenty-dollar gold-piece that shone on the floor.

"One drink at your expense, and then we'll take in the circus at mine."

As the coin slipped back into his pocket it jingled against a lot of its fellows, and when Kemp called for liquid refreshments for the two he took a note of rather large denomination from a roll that looked as though it might contain a good many more of the same kind. Then, arm in arm, as though they had been acquainted for a year, they moved toward the green doors at the far end of the saloon. Ed Buckle had just thrown them open, and the crowd was streaming in that direction.

"A friend of mine," said Kemp, with a nod, as they approached. "He wants to see the elephant in Hard Luck and I guess we can convince him that we have the animal on hand for the accommodation of all inquiring friends."

"True for you," responded Buckle, and the two passed on in.

"I take mine by the year," said Kemp, in answer to the glance that the other turned on him. "Have a box and the privilege of filling it up to the roof. I generally drop in to see how things are running, and somehow it's about as cheap this way as any other. I paid Ed a pretty stiff price; but then I happened to be flush just then. The next day I went dead broke, and would have had to borrow to come in. Don't you see, this put me 'way ahead?"

"Yes, but I don't see so clearly what your hurry was, about getting here."

"Bless your soul, I wasn't talking about my hurry; I was only giving you a gentle hint that if you wanted to get in in time for the opening chorus you didn't want to waste the precious moments, fussing with me. I judged that you were a stranger in town, and only gave you a pointer."

"Not so much of a stranger as you seem to think. My name is King Kennedy, by the way, and you can use any part of it that strikes you. I have seen something of this town and its people in the past, and I wouldn't wonder if they saw a good deal of me in the future. I did not calculate on being your guest this evening, but as I am, I guess you will hardly think that I intend to make myself unpleasant. Is there really anything to see, or is the Odeon a fake of the proprietors that the boys take in because there is nothing better?"

There had been a remarkable change of manner in King Kennedy, and one that Dandy Bill scarcely believed in. The man had certainly addressed him for the purpose of raising a row, and he fancied that if not on his guard something of the kind would turn up again. Yet, to all appearance, Kennedy was now as cordial as though this suddenly-formed acquaintanceship had been sought in the regular way.

"There's not much of it, but what there is can't well be beat—unless it is some of the first part. That, we all understand, is thrown in to fill the bill; and it's not half bad, anyhow. There goes the bell. You can have a chance to judge for yourself."

The "first part" was simply a small minstrel band, that gave half a dozen songs to an audience that was by no means critical, the jokes that interspersed the programme being of the average age, told with the average manner, and receiving rather more than the usual amount of applause.

With a little care, in an establishment like the Odeon, a short programme can be stretched so as to cover considerably more time than it calls for. There were enough in the audience who took opportunity during the applause and the business to seek the other room to make it an item in the receipts of the manager.

The performances generally closed with a short farce, and between that and the first part was an olio, in which, at present, Myrtle Mead appeared.

King Kennedy sat through the musical part of the entertainment with the air of a man accustomed to hear better things; but with a silent patience that did not interfere with the

enjoyment of any one who might catch a glimpse of his face. When, however, the person who acted as stage-manager appeared before the footlights, and announced, "Miss Myrtle Mead, in her grand aerial flight," he betrayed signs of animation, and leaned forward with a glitter in his eyes that did not escape Mr. Kemp.

Then Miss Myrtle came gliding on the stage, in her glittering acrobatic costume, gave a wave of her shapely arm and a graceful droop of her shoulders, at which a storm of applause rung through the house, in the midst of which she swung herself lightly from the floor.

The box occupied by Dandy Bill and his guest was one from which the young lady could be watched to the best of advantage, though it did not come under her observation during the most of her act. She had been swinging and twisting and turning, showing her strength and skill; and while the bar was yet floating back and forth she suddenly rose to her feet on it, with so little effort that it was impossible to see how it was done. Then, loosening her hands from the ropes on either side, she stood fearlessly erect, balancing herself with an ease and abandon which again brought a roar up from the house below.

In the midst of the tempest of cheers, Dandy Bill caught the sound of an exclamation from her lips, and saw that her whole frame was shivering and her eyes fixed as if by fascination on his box.

He knew that this was the first time she had looked in this direction since coming on the stage, and doubtless this was only a chance view; but that there was something there that affected her deeply he knew without telling. And that it was his appearance he never for a moment suspected.

Was it King Kennedy at whom she was staring? It was perhaps fortunate for that gentleman that Kemp was just then too anxious for the safety of the girl to pay much attention to him. She was balancing at a height of fifteen or twenty feet from the stage, and with her wits about her might make the drop without serious injury; but in her present frame of mind would be apt to fall like a log.

"Catch on to the side ropes!" he shouted, scarcely conscious of speaking.

His warning came too late, for, as it rung through the house, she threw her arms up and pitched backward, head-first, toward the stage.

CHAPTER VII.

A BOLD STROKE.

AN accident to a man generally creates some confusion; but when the victim is a young and handsome woman, small blame to the house if it rises *en masse*. The patrons of the Odeon were not of the tender-hearted class, but they sprang to their feet almost to a man, as they saw Myrtle totter and throw up her hands. When she fell there was a general rush from all sides toward the stage. Then, the rush was checked as suddenly as it had begun, and a ringing cheer went up.

At the moment that her feet left the trapeze a man sprang from behind the scenes. His face was turned directly upward, and with arms up-raised he stood beneath the falling girl. Down into his arms she dropped; and though he gave way under the shock, and seemed as though he must be crushed, yet Myrtle never touched the stage floor. Whoever he was the gallant rescuer understood his business. The audience saw him crouch—and rise again, holding her as though she was a child. With another effort he flung her over his shoulder and disappeared by the same way he had come. At the same time a man sprang from Dandy Bill's box to the stage, and followed behind the scenes.

It was not Kemp, however. That gentleman was on the floor, as nearly unconscious as he had ever been to not turn the corner.

For once he had been caught napping, though he could scarcely be blamed for it. The danger to Myrtle had left him no eyes for anything else. He even forgot that this man at his side was responsible for the accident; and though he could not be in time to break the fall he intended to reach the stage as soon as she did. He was crouching for a spring when King Kennedy's grasp fell on his neck, and he was flung violently back. Even then he did not think of anything save Myrtle. The box was small, and he had not far to go. As quick, almost, as thought he was at the front again, his eyes searching for nothing but the stage.

"If I must I must," said Kennedy, grimly, and his right fist shot out. "It was a coward blow, but we can't be bothered with you."

And consoling himself with this reflection, he sprang out himself.

As he went those nearest to the stage faced the crowd and waved it back.

"Don't crowd! The girl is all right; give her a show, won't you? If you rush in on her you'll scare her to death. Be a little decent."

There seemed to be very good sense in this, and as the orchestra, which was composed of the gentlemen who appeared in the first part, struck up a lively air, the excitement would have been allayed if it had not been for certain

suspicious sounds that came from behind the scenes.

Excited voices did not amount to much under the circumstances, but when there was the sharp cracking of a revolver mingled with them the forward movement was renewed.

The men in the middle and rear of the audience grew desperately anxious to go forward, while those in front seemed as determined that they should not. Blows were struck; men tumbled to this side and that; and then came a fusillade of firearms that made the more timid ones hunt a place in the rear, and, for the first time, caused a suspicion in the minds of the cool heads that there was more than a simple accident in all this.

Before their suspicions had time to fairly ripen every light in the room was out, and the place plunged in darkness.

There were two men in the house who recognized the individual who had so opportunely sprung upon the stage and caught the girl in his arms. The two men were Buck Banker and his pard.

"It's that infernal dude we met on ther mountain! He hez some game now, an' don't you furgit it! Here goes ter see what she are. Foller me."

Hastily muttering his suspicion to his partner, Buck dashed through a side door near them, that opened into a narrow passageway, leading to the boxes on that side of the stage, and ending with a door that furnished a way of reaching the rear of the stage.

Along this hall they hurried—only to find the door at the further end locked.

They heard the noise of the shouting and the firearms, and Buck never hesitated, but flung himself forward in such good earnest that the shattered panels went flying in every direction, though he was sent reeling back by the violence of the shock. When he had gathered himself up, and taken a step or two forward he found that the whole house was plunged in darkness, except for the one poor lamp that glimmered about the center of the hall they had just left. Two or three men were groaning, and they could hear the noise of a struggle going on at the door that led to the street.

This contest, whoever might be engaged in it, did not last long, since before they could reach the door—and they did not delay an instant—the struggle ceased, and they were only in time to hear a yell of triumph as a body of horsemen swept away.

"They're kerryin' their woweded," exclaimed Steve, his sharp eyes noting the fact that some of the steeds bore double burdens. "Bet you thar war some high old times; but what in sufferin' Moses war it all about?"

"You say—but here's some ov their leavin's. Strike me dead ef I don't b'lieve it's ther dude hisself."

A man was lying just at the bottom of the one step, and Buck had almost stepped on him as he came out.

Much as Banker would have liked to have got even for the drubbing he had received he hardly cared to take satisfaction out of a man who was already insensible; and in default of knowing what had happened it was not altogether safe. There would be a crowd in a moment, and as this man had done Myrtle such good service he would have his friends, who might be more than willing to inflict summary vengeance on the man or men that harmed him.

What had happened?

Very much what Buck had begun to suspect.

When Myrtle threw up her arms and tottered, the "duke" was standing just out of view of the audience, at one of the side entrances, watching her; and he lost no time, so that he was able to receive her in his arms. By yielding to the shock he retained his grasp; and recognizing that she was insensible he carried her behind the scenes. Of course he had not the least idea that there was other danger in the air, and his thoughts and eyes were all for the girl, and none for himself. As he lowered her gently to a bench, two or three of the people engaged in the house came hurrying up, all more or less excited. He saw that Myrtle's eyes were beginning to show signs of returning consciousness, and stepping back himself he waved the others away.

It was just then that King Kennedy darted on the scene. Without a word he caught up the almost insensible girl and rushed on. He knew the house well, or was guided by more than ordinary instinct, for his course was directly toward the nearest way of egress.

His touch, however, seemed to arouse the girl, who struggled slightly in his arms and uttered a feeble cry.

The cry brought assistance. Every one else remained motionless, or shrunk aside at sight of the brandished revolver in Kennedy's left hand, but a little man, with a stick in his fist, sprung into his path.

"Joost wait a bit, misther, an' be ther same token it's Phelim McGallagin phat's talkin' wid ye."

If Phelim had not been doing something more than talk it is most likely he would have been gathered in to his fathers, for the hand that held the revolver swung toward him, and the

finger that was on the trigger meant to press hard when the barrel was in line. But a shade too soon for the snap-shot the stick whirled around, striking King Kennedy's arm at the elbow. The pistol dropped from his hand, exploding as it fell, while the man staggered half-way around, and almost dropped Myrtle. He staggered; but he neither faltered nor stopped. Before Phelim could strike another blow he had shifted the position of the girl so that she protected him, at the same time giving a shrill whistle.

In response there was a rush of feet from without, and half a dozen men came bursting through the door, which was not far distant.

"Lay out this fool!" shouted Kennedy, "and any one else that tries to mix in. Then cover my retreat, and as soon as you hear the signal, vamose."

At the noise made by the entrance of these men, Phelim wheeled and drew back a step or two, so that he could have an eye on them as well as on King Kennedy. He understood them at a glance, and did not wait for Kennedy to finish his orders. Boldly he charged the gang, at the same time that his companion, or master, threw himself on the man, struggling fiercely to tear Myrtle from his arms.

Phelim had one point in his favor. It was not safe to shoot when he was once more in line between King Kennedy and his men; and with the shillelah he so skillfully wielded, he had an idea that he would be a match for them all. At any rate, the stick rose and fell, it punched and struck; and he was getting away with them in fine style, when the lights went out. As if the blow had been carefully timed, at the same instant he was felled to the floor by a stroke from the clubbed butt of a revolver, while shouts and shots made the darkness hideous.

It was King Kennedy who struck the blow. Unfortunately, Myrtle had so far recovered, that when Kennedy leaned forward to strike at the man who was striving to tear her from his arms she suddenly exerted all her strength, writhed away from his grasp, and fled—only to rush past Phelim and fall into the hands of her enemies!

Once securely in their hands, the men turned, and began to retreat.

At the door were a number of horses, under the charge of two of the party. Without loss of time Myrtle was placed upon one, in front of a mounted man. One or two of Phelim's victims had been dragged out of the hall, and were steadied in front of as many of the unhurt; and the whole gang appeared to linger only for King Kennedy.

That chief had drawn to one side of the door, and was waiting. As "the duke" came rushing out he received a crushing blow just behind the ear. Then Kennedy, with a harsh laugh, bounded into the saddle of the horse that was being held for him, and sharply gave the order to move forward.

He did not see the man who, as they urged their horses away at as good speed as could be got at short notice, bounded up behind the rearmost horseman, since his interest was centered on Myrtle Mead, who was striving to break from the arms of the man who held her. With some little change in the programme, the abduction had been accomplished according to plan, and King Kennedy and his prize were away.

The disappearance was just in time. The Odeon was emptying itself front and rear, and half a minute later there were enough armed men at the rear door to have made a very pretty fight. They were all somewhat puzzled as to what had happened, and clustered around Buck Banker, who was supporting the head of a limp and drooping man.

While they were asking who he was, and making threats suitable to the occasion, this man revived somewhat, raised his head from Banker's knee, and feebly murmured:

"Disgusting, aw, 'pon honnah, don'chaw know."

CHAPTER VIII.

PHELIM FINDS PLENTY OF FUN.

WHEN the daring abductors were about to dash away, a man came rushing out of the Odeon, and bounded up behind the rearmost rider. As the moon was not yet up he might well be taken for one of the party by any one looking backward, since more than one of the horses carried double, while others were being led.

There was no sound that indicated differently, and if this fellow was an intruder, the man that had him for an involuntary comrade seemed strangely indifferent.

If King Kennedy had been in his place it is more than likely he would have thought that he could have afforded a little of that same indifference. When the intruder sprung up it was so unconcernedly, with so little show of antagonism, that it seemed more than likely that it was one of the crowd who had been left behind in the struggle, and who was now taking his last chance. Once seated, and the steeds in motion, there was a change as sudden as it was

startling. The muzzle of a revolver came boring into the neck of the proprietor of the steed, and a voice whispered into his ear:

"Wan howly worrud an' ye are a did mon. D'yez moinde, now? Whin me finger crooks off goes the top av yer head, an' there'll be a hole in yer hat. It's Phelim McGallagin that's wid ye, an' he's come to stay."

The words of themselves would have been startling enough; but they would have been followed by a desperate struggle, no doubt, if the cold iron had not given a strong emphasis, a trifle in advance. There might be punishment in the future if no alarm was given; but present death was too obvious to allow of any nonsense. A struggle or a loud word, and it was good-by to worldly matters.

What was Phelim's object the man thought he could guess. The Irishman, whom he recognized by his voice as the fellow that had wielded his stick to such good advantage until the lights went out, probably intended to keep his perch until certain in which way the expedition was going, and then would attempt to spring down and slip away in the darkness. If nothing happened before that time, he thought that he could block that game in one way or another. Saving his own life was the first consideration; but saving his credit with the gang was also an object, if it could be done without too much danger to himself.

"Don't ye git too close, me b'ye, but gallop along," whispered Phelim, when he saw that his captive was open to reason.

"O'im not wantin' ter git too nigh ther boss, bad luck to him! It's only a bit av an observashun O'im takin', an' av yez wants a howl head, an' good loongs afther O'im done, ye must take a hint loike loightning av Oigive it to you. It's not twice O'll be afther sp'akin' to yez."

After that warning the twain rode on in silence, keeping about the same distance in the rear as they had held on starting. The men were all well mounted, the pace was a rattling one, so that it was not at all strange that no one changed his relative position, especially if his horse was double-weighted.

It was really a pity that anything should arise to disturb the amiable way in which the two were progressing; but it came sooner than either expected. The pace in front slackened, and though Phelim caused their own to moderate, they were not out of hearing distance when King Kennedy spoke.

"You, Dennis, there, drop Tom to keep an eye to the rear, and ride up. I want you."

"Dhrap goes," muttered Phelim, at hearing the man addressed by a name so unmistakably Irish.

"If it's his neck that's bruck, small blame to mesilf—an' down wid ye!"

The dropping was not done exactly in the way contemplated in the order, nor was it likely to leave the man in condition for observing the movements of any one following in pursuit. Phelim's hands suddenly took a solid gripe, and before the fellow had time for a cry there was a twist and a heave, and he struck the trail heavily with his head. Without even a glance to see if Dennis the true was motionless, the conqueror rode on, slyly making his horse continue the curvettings that had originally been excited by the fall of his proper rider.

Phelim had no particular purpose in view, but fortunately for his immediate safety, he did not greatly differ in size and general appearance from the man he had so summarily disposed of. If his voice did not betray him, he might for a little escape detection at tolerably close quarters.

"Follow Lieutenant Murray, and do what he tells you till you hear from me," was the concise order given; and as Phelim noticed a squad of men drawn to one side, it was not difficult to guess that Lieutenant Murray was one of the number. Without a word of reply he drew his horse in that direction.

As if they had only been waiting for him, the foremost man moved off, and the rest followed at the distance of a few yards. When he had taken a closer look he saw, to his delight, that one horse bore a double load, and that one of its riders was a woman.

The retreat that followed was so rapid that it almost resembled a flight, and there was little chance for conversation. Of course this suited the intruder, since it not only lessened the chances of his being recognized, but rapidly increased the distance between them and the leader who had unwittingly played into the hands of the out-ider.

If the real Dennis came to his senses the probability was that he would lose no time in telling his story—unless his feelings were too deep for utterance, in which case he might desert his post, and leave behind him the chance of punishment for having allowed himself to be taken in in such a baldfaced manner. How that would be Phelim could not guess, for as yet he had not succeeded in discovering what these men were, or what was the real object in the bold raid.

Phelim did not trouble himself much in regard to such matters; but kept his attention centered on the prisoner, who, by this time, had become somewhat resigned to her fate. He was reasonably sure of detection at no very distant mo-

ment, and how he was to help her before the explosion was what he could not make out.

"Faith, an' Oi could pull an' git away wid the majority, but what wad the balance be doin'? An' it looks moighty much loike murther to be downin' min fur k'apes whin they ain't lookin'. It's wait Oi will tell they gives me a chance, an' thin Oi'll make thim think it's ther Owld Boy on wh'ales that they've woke. Stiddy, now. It's ther boss that's talkin'. Sor, to ye!"

His quick ears had caught the name of Dennis, called by the lieutenant, and he answered promptly.

"You and Tony, here, are to go on to see Camp, and tell him to drive the herd in to the Dark Moon Crossing, where the captain is to join us. You don't want to waste any time about it, either. You will stay with him. Insist on it that he is to use dispatch—and you might hint that if he does not move promptly some one will be inquiring the reason why."

"Yis, sor."

"How soon do you think you can make the ride?"

"Ashk Tony, an' av ye give me ther worrud Oi'll be there forninst him."

"Take it then. I suspect that was the reason you were chosen for the work. So you don't take the life out of your horses before you get there you can race as much as you want to; but if there's anything of that old quarrel cropping up so as to interfere with business the captain will shoot you both—or the man that he gets hold of. I have given Tony the same orders and warnings; now, away with you!"

Having passed muster by such an extraordinary piece of good luck Phelim had no desire to spoil it all. With a salute he turned toward the man that had been pointed at when the unknown Tony was mentioned. It was a game of follow my leader, and the Irishman intended to play it for all that it was worth as long as the cards seemed to suit his hand.

Tony had heard the final remarks of the lieutenant, and moved sullenly away, without giving more than a glance of hate at the man with whom he supposed himself at variance.

Phelim followed, as his leader struck out directly to the south. The lieutenant looked after him thoughtfully, but without suspicion; and the two men were soon lost to his sight.

For a mile they galloped; the Mexican, Tony, a trifle in the lead. Phelim had no intention of seeking Camp, but was watching for a chance to dispose of his comrade without actually assassinating him. Had they both been on the ground the opportunity would doubtless have come soon enough; but on horseback the Irishman could not be so sure of his game, though more than once his hand had moved half-way toward his ready revolver as the time appeared to have come.

The warning of the lieutenant had not been lost, however. Despite the carelessness with which he rode it might be possible that Tony was watching him with much the same purpose in view, and it might not be easy to surprise him. At last the Mexican seemed to tire of his lonely lead, and moderated his pace enough to allow Phelim to range alongside. Either by chance, or a skillfully executed maneuver, as the Irishman forged nearer his mustang was crowded abruptly the left. The movement threw the horse into trouble. One foot landed in a hole, the burrow of a prairie dog or something of the kind, he stumbled, and fell.

The accident was unexpected, but did not find the rider unprepared to meet it. Before the horse touched the ground Phelim had his feet out of the stirrups, and was ready to spring away from the struggling beast. He would have escaped without injury had not Tony thrown his right foot over his horse's neck and leaped down upon him.

"Curse thee, vile dog!" the Mexican hissed. "Die!"

And over the head of the unfortunate Phelim flashed the keen blade of a bright knife.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS HAZZARD LEARNS THE NEWS.

THE crowd at the rear of the Odeon roared in spite of itself at the drawled exclamation, or whatever it might be called, of the man who slowly drew himself out of Buck Banker's arms. There seemed so much solid truth in what he said, and it was so naively expressed, that for a moment everybody forgot to be bloodthirsty. By the time the memory of the late scene in the theater came surging back this man was recognized by some one as the individual that had done the missing actress such good service at the time of her fall.

Probably the supposition that he could tell something more about what had happened served to hold the larger part of the men about him interested in what further he might say when he came more fully to his senses.

In this they were doomed to disappointment. Whatever he might know, he had nothing to say, and would have stalked away without an attempt to answer a single one of the numerous questions that were showered upon him if he had been allowed to do so.

The crowd in general did not care to interfere with him for the present, when Buck Banker

began to tell his story. Buck only knew that there had been fighting of some kind behind the scenes, and that quite a large party of horsemen had ridden away from the door when that was over; but out of that much material he was able to amplify a respectable history, that did not go far from the actual truth. What the men would have liked would have been some corroboration, and extra details from this stranger, who seemed to have been in the heart of the scrimmage. When these could not be obtained they were willing to let him go, and would have done so if Dandy Bill had not come rushing out.

The sport, without having been actually deprived of his senses, had been knocked "silly," and had not moved from the spot where he last fell until the riot in the house was entirely over. At first he was too nearly dazed to understand what had happened, but he found out after a little, and was wild with wrath. He did not doubt that King Kennedy had been at the front of the outrage.

With him came Ed Buckle, who had seen from the other end of the hall the accident, but had been shut in by the crowd, and had not arrived behind the scenes until the raiders were gone and the lamps relit. One or two of the *attaches* of the house had been slightly wounded, and everything was in such a confusion that it took some little time for the proprietor to understand the confused statements that he heard, or that his star had been carried off. When the two hurried out they came upon the "duke," who was modestly trying to edge away.

"Here, you! Does any one know anything more about this infernal outrage? Which way did they go; and who was in the gang?"

Kemp caught the young man by the arm because he happened to be the nearest man to him, and his gripe was not a very light one, either. At the same time he did not know that this was the person who had borne Myrtle off the stage. He was somewhat surprised at bearing Steve Lindsay whisper in his ear:

"Ef you stir him up that gerloot orter give yer ther facts by ther cord. He's one ov them me an' Buck war tellin' yer ov, an' mebbe he helped git up ther racket. We jest picked him up whar some one hed dropped him; but who that some one war he don't say. Kin yer make him sing?"

Without a word, Dandy dragged his prisoner back into the building. A light was now burning within the hall, and under this he stopped and gazed earnestly into the face of his feebly-struggling captive.

"When I size a man up I don't generally get far out, but I've been left once to-night, and I won't say you're more fool than knave till I hear you talk. What was going on here; and where did you come in at? Talk up, for I've no time to waste."

"Aw, ask Phelim, don'chaw know."

There was neither hurry nor excitement in the way the answer was made, nor did the meaning behind it seem anything but earnest. If there had been anything like jest or evasion apparent in his words, Kemp would have let go the blow that he half meditated. Instead, he answered, in a tone that all the time grew calmer and colder:

"Young man, if you don't understand that you're in a heap of danger the moment suspicion begins to point your way you are all that you look, and a heap more. Let Phelim talk for himself if he is able; and you tell what you know."

"But, aw, I, aw, don't talk. I, aw, can't talk. It is, aw, what Phelim is foah, don'chaw know?"

Slow, deliberate, convincing, the language of the gentleman was nevertheless not calculated to soothe a man who was in such a hurry as possessed Kemp, and it was fortunate that Buckle had followed into the hall.

"Let up on him Bill," said the latter.

"I think the fellow is all right enough, except that he's a trifle wrong in the upper story. He has a letter from my old side pard, Charley Banks, who puts it in about that shape, but asks me to give him the run of the house for the sake of old time's rocks. The Irishman is his companion, or servant, I couldn't make out which, and can talk for a dozen. Perhaps he is laid out though. We ought to look around. And this gentleman has a trifle of nerve and muscle, too. He caught Myrtle when she tumbled off the bar, and she makes a solid armful. He may be a little abroad yet from that; and, as I understand it, some one slugged him, to boot."

"So they did, aw. Disgusting, don'chaw know?"

"And you did your best for the young lady?" continued Buckle.

"'Pon honnaw."

"I reckon that's about all he's good for till he has a sleep over it, and pulls himself together. The girl's gone, and there was a gang that took her. Better get up another gang and go after before the scent is cold."

The advice was good, but Dandy shook his head.

"A gang is not going to do much good in this case, now that they have had time to clear the

town. This thing has been worked up by a man that knows how to run it. I'll lay a hundred to ten that their horses have the heels of anything in the camp, and that as long as they are on the run we can't get nearer to them than they want us. It's going to be a longer job than you count on if the girl don't give them the slip herself. But, by heavens! They will have a wolf on the trail, and if anything happens to her beyond fright and shock, I'll set the thing even if it takes a lifetime. I warned her only this evening, but I never suspected that the thing would come in such a desperate shape. She said that she could protect herself, and I hope she can. There will be need enough for her to make her word good before any one can get to her from Hard Luck."

Any one who was acquainted with the dandy sport would have scarcely recognized him just then. He was more thoughtful and more earnest than ever before he had been known to be.

"Well, well, Bill, it may be that she is not as badly scared as we think for, and I'm betting that when you get on the trail you will make the rustlers sick. How soon you going on the road?"

"There is no hurry now. With the start they have they cannot be overhauled till they are ready for it. It is safe to say that the man has a spy or two here, who would be able to let him know that we were coming if we started to-night. It will be dark until almost morning, and if the trail is at all blind there's none of us could lift it out of a tangle till daylight came. No, I'm just going to get a good ready before I move a step, and I'll know that this delicate daisy is not one of their pards before I leave him behind. If he is, I'll break him all apart as a starter."

The threat did not have any terrifying effect. The delicate daisy was attending strictly to himself, examining into his hurts, and slowly mopping away with his handkerchief a little splotch of blood that was on the corner of his jaw. Buckle was silent for a moment, immersed in thought. Then the result of his cogitations was made manifest.

"Somebody ought to go around and break the news to her aunt. The old lady is a fit subject for the high strikes, and I don't want her roaring around here. If you don't want me, I'll try and get things straight in the house, and then go around and let her know. There is no use in my telling you what to do, and if you want to run things, I'm willing. Too many cooks spoil the broth, and there ain't room enough for two bosses."

"That's square, and no mistake. I'd sooner face the whole gang of the rustlers than interview that one lone female. Of course, you understand I'm not standing out against anything the boys may want to do; but, for the present, I'm working on my own level. I'll find the girl, and get even with that chap who calls himself 'King Kennedy.'"

In a thoughtful way he turned and walked off, a cool resolution having taken the place of the angry excitement of the first moments after the outrage.

Without a word the dude had slipped out some time during the discussion, so that Buckle was free to look after the affairs of his saloon, and learn what had been done to aid Myrtle, before making his contemplated call on the aunt of the latter. As he had an efficient corps of assistants, the house was in good running order, and the saloon doing as thriving a business as he could wish for. A dozen mounted men had gone in pursuit, and as all were well armed with Winchesters and revolvers, it was supposed that there would be lively times if they succeeded in overhauling the raiders.

He could find out few details of the affair that he was not already familiar with, and accordingly, after a few orders to his subordinates, Buckle started out on his mission to the aunt of the missing trapezist.

About this lady, who was known to Hard Luck as Miss Hazzard, very little was understood, except that she escorted her niece to the Odeon nightly and remained seated in the shabby little green room until her act was over, meanwhile speaking to no one. The two lived in a small, but rather comfortable cabin, not far from the only hotel in the place that deserved the name. As far as was known they received no visitors.

Once or twice Buckle had occasion to address the aunt, but her manner was not encouraging, and he had never had a fair view of her face, which had always been hidden by a veil. He did not know whether to prepare himself for tears or hard words, and he rapped at the door with some misgivings.

A shrill voice from within told him to enter. He raised the latch and went in.

Miss Hazzard was sitting, or rather reclining, in a comfortable arm-chair. She was tall, gaunt and angular; and from the furtive glance that he took, she had the face of one who had suffered much. She listened to the concise statement of the manager in silence; and after he had finished did not at once speak.

At that Buckle was surprised. He looked up and saw that a pair of dead white eyes regarded him as if to read him through and through, in

spite of their orbs being sightless. For the first time he understood that the lady was blind.

"And nobody knew them?" she asked, at length.

"None of the boys have dropped to them yet. There were some strangers around—looked like cowboys from the drive—but no one suspected them till the frolic began. One that gave his name as King Kennedy knocked Dandy Bill Kemp endways and snatched the young lady. That's all that any one knows about them, except that there is a gang of rustlers down in the southern country that would be the men for such an outrage if they took it into their heads; but their stamping-ground is a hundred miles away, and how do they know anything about Miss Myrtle? I can't sabbe that they would get in their work so quick unless it was all planned out beforehand. As for King Kennedy—I never heard the name before and I guess I know of about all the bad men that flourish in these regions. Maybe you can tell something about him."

"No, no! I am helpless, and understand nothing. Let me be! If you can help, go and do it! If you are really men, you will bring her back. If not—my curses on you all! If I had been there it would not have happened. Go, go!"

It was letting him off a good deal easier than he had hoped for, and Buckle did not hesitate about taking advantage of the order. He evacuated forthwith.

When the door had closed behind him the form of the woman straightened, and her whole aspect changed.

"You have found me, King Kennedy, and you think you have struck the first blow! But the end is not yet. Ha, ha! You are dealing with a desperate woman!"

CHAPTER X.

PHELIM FINDS A FUGITIVE.

PHELIM was in a dangerous predicament, and did not see his way out at all. There was no time to look around for an avenue of escape, and in reality he was not looking for any. All that he did was mechanical. There was a grip on his throat and a knife coming down. He gave a swift turn of his body, and the blade passed his breast, burying itself in the ground. Then he threw his arms around the Mexican, and put on a bug that was as fervent as though it came from a dozen bears, all rolled into one.

Tony thought he had tested the strength of this man once before, and had found out all about it. Now he discovered that there was a mistake somewhere; and that he was in a scrape that it was not so easy to get out of. He tore the knife from the ground, and attempted to again use it. That was the biggest kind of a mistake. While he was thinking about the knife, Phelim was attending to something else. There was a heave and a scramble, after which the relative positions were reversed. It was the Mexican that was in the box, and Phelim that was holding the lid down.

In other words the latter had turned his antagonist, gained possession of the knife, and had a knee firmly fixed in the small of Tony's back, while the following remarks were more pleasant to make than to hear:

"Bad 'cess to yez, but it's this toime Oi hev ther did midicine on yez, an', be ther powers. Oi'm going to k'ape it. Av yez iver come back at me ag'in, sure, Oi'll know it's a gowst, an' won't bother about it at all at all. Say yer prayers; an' ther loikes av ye niver will n'ade a lasht look at the gr'ane fields—be the same token, it's black enough they are afther lookin' at this howly minnit."

"Carrejo!" howled Tony. "That is not the voice of Dennis, at all! It's a mistake. Hold on. It will be worth thy while to know that which I have to tell thee. And if I come not back, thou knowest the warning that was given to us."

"Oi know it's a mistake, bad luck to yez; but mistakes goes, all the same. Av they didn't, an' I lit yez up, it's Phelim that w'd be did. It's sorry Oi am, but there's no hilt for it."

Nevertheless he held his hand, though watching closely to see that his prisoner did not obtain an advantage during the discussion that was to follow.

"Upon the cross I swear—but let me go, and I breathe no word of what has happened here. Thy life was at stake, and I was but the tool that was to cut it short. Blame not me, but those that sent me, and that will trail thee down. I tell thee that I had (only the hate of the man I took thee for, and had I known it was not he who has harmed me beyond all mercy I would never have attacked thee, when thou wert down—or at any other time."

"Av Oi was the r'ale Dennis, it's little that Oi w'd be afther blamin' ye; but to take a stranger an' a orphan—it makes me blood boil. Phat can Oi do wid ye anyhow?"

"Bind me here so tightly as thou mayest choose, and leave me to chance and the wolves. Then go thy way in peace. It will give thee time to get beyond the reach of the captain. No member of the Lifters' League art thou, and if once within his hands no mercy canst thou look for. Yet, why shouldst thou seek to harm

Antonio, who has done thee no evil as yet, and some day may repay thee with interest if thou art merciful now?"

"Bedad, an' it sounds as if there moight be somethin' in that same. Av Oi wor to lit ye go phat would ye be afther doin'?"

"Straight would I ride, to find the Americans. It is a good hundred miles, and long before I got back, what I might say would make no difference to thee."

Phelim did a little rapid thinking. If there was anything in the warning that had been given to the Mexican as well as to himself it was likely that Tony, if set free in such a way that he could not do immediate mischief, would keep his promise, and leave his explanations until his return. That might suit his hand better than to have a corpse to dispose of.

"Done, for a experiment. But Oi'm takin' no big chances. Oi'll fix ye so ye can't bite tell Oi get out av the way. Thin ye kin kick or go on wid yer errand. But av ye folly me into Harrud Luck, it's did mate ye'll be before ye know what struck ye."

Then Phelim proceeded to disarm the fellow, and piled his weapons up at the distance of a hundred yards or so, where they might be found after a little search, and lariatd his mustang on the opposite side, at about the same distance. After that, with his revolver still in his hand, he ordered the Mexican to walk by his side, until he had put some distance between him and the spot. His horse's head was turned toward Hard Luck when he dismissed his unwilling attendant.

"You can s'ake! Camp, az soon as ye want, but av ye know what's good for yez ye won't visit the town. Next toime I'll be afther shootin' on soight. Be off wid ye, afore ye furet to foind yer weepens. Ye can't say Oi didn't tr'ate ye white."

Phelim shook the rein, and spoke to his horse. Away he went at a great rate, as though in a wonderful haste to reach Hard Luck, while Antonio hurried back to secure his horse, and gather up his weapons. By the time the Mexican was armed and had sprung into the saddle the American was out of sight and hearing. Antonio listened a moment, drew a long breath, and then, without seeking a further explanation to what was in reality a perplexing mystery, turned in the direction in which he had been heading when the difficulty with the Irishman began, and pursued his journey as though nothing had happened.

In one respect he had been completely fooled; though in any event he would have acted the same. He thought that Phelim, having gained all the information possible, was on his way back to the town.

In this he was mistaken. For a little while the Irishman kept on in that course, but when he had gained a start, so that he thought there was little danger of being seen by Antonio, if that worthy took it into his head to make any observations, he turned again to the left, and aimed directly for the trail they had made after leaving Lieutenant Murray.

Although the chances were that not much could be done in trailing the outlaws until morning, he was anxious to be ready to strike in on the search at the first available moment. And the rest of an hour or two would not be the worst thing in the world for the mustang that he had accumulated.

Not every man who had ridden the line but once could have found it again in the dark. But Phelim went as straight as a bird flies, and found himself at the spot where he had last seen Murray something like an hour before sunrise.

He gave a hasty examination of the ground, and was sure that if no greater effort had been made further on to hide the trail, that by daylight he would have little trouble in following it up. By night there was too much danger of overrunning it, and he wisely concluded that a rest of an hour would be the best thing under the circumstances.

There was a lariat hanging from one of the rings on his saddle, and he staked out his horse. Then he laid down, fixed his mind on wakening in an hour, and in five minutes was asleep.

When he awoke the sun was just beginning to redden the east, and without delay Phelim began his work.

Before he had gone very far he was well satisfied that he had waited. The lay of the land changed, and it required some care to keep from losing the faint traces that were leading him.

After some hours in the saddle he saw something that he had been anxiously waiting to find—a spot where he was almost certain of there being water. He turned aside without hesitation, though he approached the covert with care.

He was not at all surprised to find that the scattering timber that surrounded the spring had occupants. As it was not thick enough to conceal an ambuscade, he approached without any attempt at concealment, though he was well aware that the two figures he could see reclining lazily near a small fire, might and probably did belong to some of the men of whom he was in pursuit. There might be others of the gang not far away, but this, he fancied, might be an out-

post; and unless they recognized he did not think they would at once attack him. If they did he was ready. His hands were in the side-pockets of his coat, and each grasped a deringer. He intended to come with the drop, and then be guided by circumstances.

As he approached nearer the men glanced up at him without giving any indication of surprise or alarm. If they were not ordinary prospectors, they had that appearance. Each man had a revolver belted at his waist, but there was no motion to draw; only a nod to Phelim as he went past them, heading straight for the spring.

"The top av the mornin' to yez!" he exclaimed, in answer. "It's wather Oi'm afther. Whin Oi fill mesilf up it's ther daycincies av the sayson that Oi'll be afther givin' ye."

"Drink hearty, pard. Thar's enough fur all indoors," was the reply of the nearest man, who had a good-looking face, and who seemed to be of a jovial sort of disposition. "Ther old man an' me hev laid in our stock; an' ef we hedn't hed ther hardest kind ov a tramp yisterday we'd bin on ther move afore this. Goin' fur?"

"That depinds. Av Oi stroike pay-dirt soon, it's little Oi care for ther long thramp. It don't agree wid me constitooshun. Was it here ye camped over the noight?"

"Right here, Patrick. Slept sound as a dollar. You don't think of turning in, do you?"

"Niver a turn. And ye wor'n't interrupted, at all, at all?"

"Nary interruption. Oh, if yer wants a quiet, lonesome spot, whar you kin lie down fur an hour, er sleep fur all eternity, this hyer are ther place. Ther ain't bin a soul along sence we struck ther ground tell you come by."

"Faix, an' it 'pears ter me that ther's some one ilse-a-comin' now. Phat's that behind yez? Tare an' 'ouns! It's a faymale woman, in ther dress av a girrul. An' phat may she be doin' there now? It's a keen oye she has, fur she says us, an' runs this way as av the devil was afther her. Git yer guns; it may be there's a drove av wolves behindt her."

Panting, breathless, her cloak gathered around her so as not to impede her movements, the figure that all three could now descry ran wearily toward them. Once the girl stumbled, and almost fell, but she caught herself, settled again into her stride, such as it was, and struggled on.

"Blame queer what a gal like that's a-doin' hyer," muttered one of the men, loud enough for Phelim to hear. "Dollars to dimes there's foul play somewhar on board."

Then, with their weapons in their hands, the three moved cautiously forward toward the fugitive, who now was not more than a few rods away.

"Thank Heaven! I have found some honest men at last!" exclaimed the girl, as she staggered forward, and fell at the feet of the older of the two strangers.

"You will save me, will you not? They must have discovered my absence by this time. Quick! Take me safely to Hard Luck, and you shall be well rewarded."

These words she gasped out, and then looked back over her shoulder, with a face full of fear.

"By the holy beaver!" muttered the man addressed, just loud enough for Phelim to hear. "It's the pretty performer at the Odeon. What's she doing here?"

CHAPTER XI.

A BAD MAN TO MEET.

PHELIM was already looking closely at the girl, and the muttered words hardly made him observe her any more keenly. Instead, he gave a sharp look at the speaker.

As he knew but few men in Hard Luck he scarcely expected to recognize the face that he had already studied without finding anything familiar in it. Nothing had been said that he was not himself on the eve of saying, and yet it gave him a shock and a suspicion.

He fixed the face of the man in his mind by that glance, and then turned to the girl, who was slowly raising herself from the ground, looking at them with an anxious, but by no means despairing gaze.

It was not hard to see how the man recognized her, after all. She was still clad in the costume in which she was accustomed to flash through her performance on the stage of the Odeon, though it was almost hidden by a horse-man's cloak that had been thrown around her shoulders.

"Rest easy, miss," said the man, stepping forward, and assisting her to her feet.

"We're not just as fine as some, but such as we are, we are all honest. If you needs a pair of pards to tie to, you might go funder and fare worse. Ez fur this stranger, he jest come into our camp; but from his looks I'd say he was as square as the averidge, and if he don't do you no good he won't do you no harm. But don't you talk of pay. That hits us below the belt, and makes us feel sick. Jim Flemming never throwed off on a woman yet when she needed him, and he never trained with a pard that would think of such a thing. If any one has been treating you bad I don't just reckon it would be good fur 'em to come nigh and try the

dose over. We ain't exactly bad men on the shoot, but when we pull trigger something is bound to drop."

If the fellow's name was Jim Flemming, as he suggested, he was a stranger to Phelim, and seemed to be to the girl. The former thought that he was rather a queer compound. He talked at one moment like a border rough; and the next his voice had an entirely different tone. He looked bold enough, but there was something about him that the Irishman did not like. He was willing that the man should talk himself out while he took notes. And at the reference to him, Phelim did not offer to introduce himself, though he did not doubt that the girl remembered him; or would, if he recalled what had happened during the struggle at the rear of the stage. He left her to exercise her own free will about that.

Meantime the girl did not look at him again. The man that had spoken attracted all her attention. Whether or not he was speaking as he thought, his words were what she wished to hear, and her face showed the joy that they gave her.

"Oh, I can never be thankful enough that my steps turned this way. Something led me, since I imagined all the time that I was going in the wrong way to find the camp. I have done better, perhaps, since I have found you. But you are in danger every moment that you linger here—greater danger than you can suspect. Last night a dozen desperate ruffians faced the whole town and took me away before them all. Blows were struck, and there was some shooting; but no one was able to help me. They carried me away on horseback—and I rode for miles, until the camp of the outlaws was reached. All that they told me was, that there was money in the venture. Probably they thought I was overcome with fright, for their guard was but slack, and in the early morning I fled away—I need not tell you after what."

She shuddered; put her hands up to her face, and was silent. Something had happened, the very remembrance of which gave her a chill of horror. Had she slain a man?

Flemming did not question her. She had said enough to explain all that he needed to know for the present, and it was time for them to be moving.

Perhaps too many precious moments had been lost already.

Before she had ceased speaking, he had turned toward his pard.

"The horses, Tom! Quick! Bring 'em up. I drop to their game. It's ther Men ov ther Moon; an' nasty men they be, fur a stranger to meet."

Then he turned to Phelim.

"You kin help a heap of yer hes ther nerve. Ride back ther way ther gal come, an' see what points you kin pick up. When yer sees that they're comin', close up. Ef we can't beat 'em in a foot-race, we may hev ter try 'em a fight. And either way, ef we want ter run purty through we'll have ter do our level best."

"Sure, an' count me in on ayther. Whin Oi once see yez fairly goin', an' me a-holdin' av the spalpeens back, Oi'll f'ale a h'ape more soddified. But, mebbe they won't come this way, afther all. Go 'long wid yez; an' Phelim McGallagin will stay an' do his duthy."

From a little thicket, where they had been fairly well concealed, Tom was leading out the horses.

He did not take things as coolly as his companion, and was in haste to be gone. He had saddled up as though his life depended on the speed with which he accomplished the operation, and would now have given some urgent warning if Flemming had not silenced him with a look. Then the latter turned to the young lady.

"I reckon you're tired enough to need a rest, an' we won't hurry things a bit faster than we have to. You mount my horse, an' Tom an' me kin take spell about at his. Ef they git too close let out all the links you find in him, an' ride fur Hard Luck. Ef you kin make it, don't lose no time in getting under kiver. The Man ov the Moon would follow straight into town if he was hot on the trail. I've heard ov him. Save yerself, an' never mind us. We kin break fur the woods. Afther we git started a bit you can't miss the way, even ef you have to go it alone."

While he spoke the man lifted the fugitive into the saddle, and handed her the reins.

Then Tom mounted in haste, Flemming took up a position beside his horse, with a hand on the nearest stirrup, and without another word to Phelim they were off.

McGallagin looked after them in a puzzled way.

Not once did they look around, but kept up a gait that made Flemming move along at a sharp trot.

"Av it wor not bethrayin' av me trist Oi would loike to see that parthy arroive in Harrud Luck," muttered the Irishman, looking after them thoughtfully until they were well under way.

"They don't take more account av Phelim than av he wor owld shoes. Mebbe he'll have somethin' to say to 'em whin this thing's done an' over. So long, pards, Oi hope Oi'll say yez

all lather. Now, Oi'll begin ter prispsect for the inemy."

The fact was, Phelim had an idea that the enemy was not on his trail at all.

Though he could not explain what he saw, he did not believe in it; and still less did he have confidence in what he heard.

It was possible that a woman like Myrtle Mead might have proved harder to hold than the outlaws had calculated on.

In that case she could have escaped from their camp, perhaps; but it was not likely that her absence would long have remained unnoticed. By this time it should have been discovered, and the Men of the Moon have been in close pursuit.

Then again, it was possible that Flemming and his pard had certain suspicions.

If they believed that Phelim belonged to the outlaw band, they would not care to have trouble with him so long as it was possible to get away without it, certain as the result might be.

Such men generally die hard; and they make some noise before they expire.

That would be a pointer that would show the rest where to come, and bring them in a hurry. It was better to tell him exactly what they were not going to do, and then get him behind them.

If that was their scheme—and there were several others that presented themselves to the fertile brain of Phelim—it worked to a charm.

"Looks kind ov quare," reflected the Irishman, a little later, as he urged his mustang quietly through the straggling timber that lay along the course of the gulch. "Rackettin' around all night to the riscue, riskin' me loife widout end; an' thin niver a worrud av the joy in me heart. But McGallagin was not born yesterday. Stiddy! Phat is that forninst me?"

He halted suddenly. At some distance he could see moving figures—horsemen, who slowly picked their way over an uneven, rising strip of ground, something like half a mile ahead. He was not sure, but he thought it safe to suspect that these men belonged to the gang that invaded the town the night before, and of whom he had lately heard for the first time, under the names of "Men of the Moon," and "The Lifters' League."

If these were the men who had lately held Myrtle, they were not troubling themselves much about their missing prisoner—or else had not discovered that they had met with any loss. They were proceeding very much at their leisure—and when Phelim had taken another look, he could have sworn that they had another prisoner under escort.

At least one horse was led; and on it was seated a slender figure that maintained a constrained attitude, like that of one tied to the saddle.

The distance was too great to see plainly, to say nothing of the intervening branches, which were just thick enough to render the separate forms indistinct.

Of course he was anxious to get a clearer or a closer view, but that was something not so easy to do, carelessly as the party seemed to be proceeding. Before he could close up the gap they would be over the divide they were even now ascending, and it was probable that their speed then would be greater than any he could make for some time.

On the other hand, he did not want to move with any great amount of recklessness. Not that he feared danger to himself, but he was anxious that they should not suspect for the present that he was on their trail. He picked his way along cautiously, trying to keep hidden as well as he could without losing too much ground, and thought that he was succeeding well when there came an interruption that he had not counted on.

A rock that lay by itself, and which he would not have thought large enough to thoroughly conceal a man, suddenly came to life. From behind it, at least, came a harsh, grating voice:

"Halt, and hands up! I have you kivered, an' it's no use to squirm. Light off that boss, an' lead him up this hyar way, takin' mighty good keer thet them friends in ther distan's don't ketch on ter what's goin' on. You an' me must hev a leetle talk afore you goes furdur."

There was no telling what would come next, but just now Phelim found himself in a trap, and no getting out. The speaker cautiously raised from his hiding-place, and the revolver that he held was at full cock, and in true line for McGallagin's head.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DARK MOON CROSSING.

"TR'ATE me tenderly," said Phelim, as he obeyed the order. "Oi know whin ther drap is on me an' act daycint according, av I foinde the mon a raysonable an' intelligint craythure. Mebbe it's a mistake that yer makin', an' av we talk a bit we'll both shoot the other way. Av they ain't fri'nds av yours then Oi won't claim thim for blood relations."

"Yer talks too much," growled back the man behind the rock. "An' all ther time ye'r tryin' ter figger how ter steal ther drop. I held yer up on ginneral principles; but I begins ter

b'l'ave thet I'll hev' ter haul you in out ov ther wet fur ther sake ov solid fun. Who be you anyhow?"

"It's a bit av a saycret, but Oi'm private secretary to a dook. Me name is Phelim McGallagin, an' that's about all Oi kin tell ye, onliss that Oi'm av Oirish descint. You'd niver suspect that, but Oi'm not too proud to own up to being from the jim av the say."

"And what are you doing here?" asked the man, who eyed like a hawk every movement of his prisoner, and never gave him even the appearance of a chance to draw his revolver.

But, during the brief colloquy already held, Phelim had also been using his eyes, and had about come to the conclusion that there was a mistake somewhere and that there was not much risk in telling the truth to account for his presence there.

In as few words as he could find to express and explain his meaning he ran over the events of the previous night and the morning.

"But ef ther beiffer got away this mornin', an' are on ther road ter Hard Luck, what in blazes are yer doin' loafin' round hyar? I don't jest take stock in your side ov ther story; but I happen ter know thet they hed ther gal just ez you've bin layin' it down. An' while I'm foolin' away time with you, yer pards over yonder's gittin' out ov ther way. I guess I'll have ter salt yer, sure, an' go on ter see how much you bin lyin'."

"And that's just what I'm thinkin'. An' av Oi'm a foolin' round here, it's because mebbe she didn't get away, afther all. I wor not tellin' you the bit av sushpicion ontill Oi wor sure that ye worn't wan av the Men ov the Moon yersilf. An' av Oi hadn't been coming to the belafe that ye wor an honist mon, Oi w'd have yez did an' burried long afore this."

It was a risky bit of business for two strangers to trust each other under such circumstances as these. There were strong chances that one or the other belonged to the outlaws, and as Phelim had suppressed mention of the way he had come to the spot, it was not to be wondered at that the stranger did not feel like giving up the drop. At the bold words of McGallagin, he laughed grimly:

"Lucky fur you thet I ain't in a hurry ter add to ther record. I bin a-list'nin', an' I guess there's too much grain 'bout that talk fur you ter b'long ter ther Men ov ther Moon. Ef yer' ez good ez yer looks, I wouldn't mind takin' yer in ez a full pard on this lay-out. I see thet they hev all got out ov range, an' it's safe ter stretch my legs, so I'll come off ther perch. Ef yer says so, shake goes; an' we're pards fur ninety days."

The man arose lazily as he spoke, uncoiling about six feet of humanity, and held out his right hand from which the revolver had already disappeared.

Phelim did not hesitate.

"Sure, any port will do in a storm. An' it's toired Oi am, wld ther scoutin' round on me own hook. But Oi niver lit go whin Oi take howld, untill the teeth m'ate. Then it's not much use to howld on. It's mighty did they're apt ter be. An' phat's the first thing in the ring? It won't do to be standin' here all day."

"Ef yer means business, an' got sense enough ter foller a man thet knows ther ropes, yer couldn't hev hit a pard thet knows them ropes better than Ben Bowlding. I kin see with half an eye whar they are headin' for, an' I ain't wastin' time follerin', when I kin git thar fu'st. Ef I ain't furdur off than I ginnerally git, it's ther Dark Moon Crossin' they're headed fur, on ther river; an' we'll beat 'em by half an hour."

"Av you're afoot, an' they at a gallop, it looks loike it," said Phelim, doubtingly.

"Teach yer gran'mother ter suck aigs. Thar's a hoss in ther bresh. Jest lead yer own along tell I find it. Then I'll show you ther short cut."

Phelim began to have an increased respect for his newly-made acquaintance when that same horse was mounted, for it had been lying as snugly concealed as its master; and never made a sound until it was told to get up. Then, keeping on the near side of the divide, the two men galloped away at a great rate.

There could be no doubt, after the ride of that day, that Bowlding was an expert in plains-craft. He led the way without hesitation, and yet kept so thoroughly out of sight of the outlaws that when he struck a bit of high ground from which he could show the thread of silver that marked the course of the river in the distance he had never before been in sight of the little knot of horsemen that they could also distinguish, coming on from the northwest. In the race for the crossing, the two, if they so chose, could be winners by several miles.

But right here Bowlding began to exercise a care that he had not previously shown.

"We want ter lay off a bit, now. We want ter let the army git in persition afore we move ag'in. We mou't be in a ho'net's nest, an' a plug in ther hole, afore we knowed it. These hyar men ain't ther bull gang, an' we wants ter know somethin' 'bout ther pards afore we makes up our minds jest how we're goin' ter make ther raffle."

With this caution he drew Phelim back, so

that the rising ground was again between them and the river, and then led the way in the direction of a gulch, the existence of which no one not previously acquainted with the ground would ever have suspected. It offered a secure hiding-place, unless they were stumbled upon by chance, and there Bowdoin proposed that they cache their horses, and for the present take things easy. He would scout around later on, while McGallagin could remain in charge of the horses, until he was needed, or something could be decided on.

Phelim had lost nothing of his self-confidence, but having settled himself down to work, showed that he was willing to listen to reason. He had seen enough of the man he had happened to meet to convince him that he knew his business, if he was only a man to be trusted. Having once made up his mind to trust him, Phelim followed his counsel without demur or delay.

Yet it must be confessed that Phelim saw his little-known pard depart, later on in the day, with feelings not altogether the most joyful. He was by no means afraid to remain by himself, and he was sure that Bowdoin was more accustomed to such work than he was; but there was an uneasy feeling that perhaps the scout might be deceived in some way by appearances; or pay too much attention to the outlaws, and not enough to their prisoner.

He smothered all this as well as he could, however, and for a time lay at rest in the dingle, just as the scout had left him.

By and by the uneasiness returned, with redoubled force; and now he began to doubt the man himself.

"Be the powers, av he wor a Man ov the Moon it's a bad box O'd be in here, an' don't ye furgit it. It's as swate a trap as mon iver hit hisself be boxed in. Phat's ter hinder thim from pickin' me off from above, an' me niver the wiser tell it wor all over. Phelim McGallagin, ye wor a fool to stay here a howly minnit whin it's a chance you have to be safe, an' iv'ry thing twice as pleasint. Git out av this, you spalpeen, an' see what's goin' on in ther worruld around ye."

Having once got that far he suffered no time to be lost in carrying his good intentions into effect. The horses were safe enough where they were, for the present, and he did not give them a second glance as he made his way up out of the gulch, on the side toward the river. He intended to see a little for himself.

At first Phelim told himself that he would only go up where he would have some chance for his life in case his retreat was discovered, or his late companion proved to be a traitor.

Once out of the gulch it was not so easy to stop at that. He could see to the north very well, but he did not know of any especial interest that he had in that direction. To the south the land rolled up, shutting out every thing that lay beyond. For a moment or two he almost fancied that the river was a delusion, or that he had got the points of the compass turned around.

Yet he was certain, after a little thought, that the crossing was there, even if he could not see it; and the position of the sun, which was low down in the heavens, confirmed him. Of course, as he was certain nothing would do him but that, he must see. With a hasty glance downward, in the direction of the spot where the horses were hid, he turned away, and carefully made his way along the side of the gulch, and up the gentle incline.

No gradual was the slope that he did not know he had mastered it until the valley on the other side burst upon his vision, with the river rolling through the midst of it. Beyond, in the higher land, he could see three gaps, at regular intervals; from which, it seemed to him, he could distinguish trails leading down to the low bank of the stream, and all coming together at a point that he had good reason to believe was the Dark Moon Crossing.

While he looked, from one of these passes the head of a herd emerged, and moved rapidly on to the ford.

CHAPTER XIII.

TOO LATE.

BUCK BANKER and his pard had a chance to see how abductors, and men of that stripe, were viewed by the citizens of Hard Luck. Of course there was a great deal of loud talk that went for what it was worth—and that was not much. Back of that there was a savage murmur, even among men who for the most part attended solely to their own affairs, that boded no good to any of the raiders who might fall into their hands. If it did not mean ropes and a hanging-see it meant nothing at all—and these were men who only spoke when they meant something.

"Reckon that thing is off, now," suggested Lindsay, as they went off from the Odeon together.

"Blame queer how two men were settin' up ther same kind ov a job atther same time. An' from ther way the boys take it I'm mighty glad that the other party got in his work first. They don't know so much here about ther other girl; but they would a turned out jest ez heavy; an' mebbe we wouldn't hev bin ez spry gettin' under liver."

Buck let him run on, and meantime was do-

ing a bit of thinking. He was trying to connect the two things together—the proposal to them, and the coup of the evening. He could not fairly join them, and yet it was almost certain to him that they had some connection. He listened to the talk of his pard with a smile on his face. When Steve was done he added his mite to the conversation, and he took quite a different view, and one that had its points that were altogether consoling to his sole listener.

"Blamed ef I agree with yer. I would hev sooner got in our work afore ther ho'nets hed this stirrin' up. They would a-bin mad ernuf anyhow, but this will make 'em jest red hot. I tell yer, it is goin' ter be a heap dangerous thing. Well it is, now."

"Then yer don't think thet ther old gent will back down?"

"Not very much. He's not one of ther back-in' kind. You kin reesk a few chips on it that he will be 'round long afore we're ready fur him, askin' us ter ketch hold ov ther drag-rope, ez we agreed to."

"What's ther matter with takin' water, then? Guess I got enough ter suit me, jest listenin' to ther talk ov these fools, who don't know what's up any more than it's allowed by law."

"Can't let go, Steve. Ther machine hez begun ter roll, an' ef yer hand opens it knocks yer down. We're in fur ther war, an' may ez well make ther best ov it tell we see which side are goin' ter win. With a boss like him I'd be almost willin' ter back him fur all ther wealth we got ter-day, when it didn't seem it were sech a mighty dangerous thing we were agreein' ter do. You kin do ez you please, but I'm layin' out ter please him, an' don't yer disremember. Ef you know shucks you'll try it on ther same line."

"Jest ez you say. When we don't think alike thar's only one thing ter do, an' that you kin do, er not, ez it strikes yer. Ef you don't I'll hev ter hunt fur a new pard."

"I wouldn't advise such old-time pards to fight between themselves," said a low voice at their shoulders, though they had not heard a footstep near, and imagined themselves alone.

The voice was familiar, and when they turned they were face to face with Howard Bromwell.

"It is a little too public here, to have a conversation. Keep straight ahead for a few moments and I will join you."

Steve shrugged his shoulders, yet they went on without attempting to return any answer to the words that were a command, in spite of the easy way they were uttered.

"Wonder what he is up to now," muttered Buck, as they passed out of hearing.

"He's a cuss on wheels, and war list'nin' to see how we war feelin'."

"A game what brings money are good ter buck any time, ef ther reesk ain't too big. We kin tell better when he talks; an' there ain't much use ter guess tell he does. Keep yer clamshells closed tight tell we git out ov this burg. It strikes me we bin a-talkin' too much as it are."

Somewhat pettishly spoke the other, and in silence they followed the trail until it took them out of town.

Before long they were joined by Bromwell. He wasted no time in preliminaries.

"You saw the affair at the Odeon, did you not?"

"We seen ther girl tumble; an' a young feller ketch her. After that there weren't much more ter be seen. We struck behind ther stage, but ther lights went out, an' we jest caught on to ther outlines ov ther racket. Ther town are makin' more ov a howl about it than if a dozen men hed bin planted with ther boots on."

"Then you did not see the man who actually took her out of the building?"

"Nary see."

"A pity; but no difference, perhaps. You remember King Kennedy?"

"Do you know everything?" was the somewhat irrelevant answer.

"Pretty nearly, so that for the future it is no use to ask me such questions. I see that you remember. He was the man who carried out the daring scheme to-night, and at the same time owned to the name that he has dropped for so long. He is not one with Hard Luck, unless I am greatly mistaken, and he has made himself fair game for us. He has struck sooner than I expected, and so blocked the little game I had arranged for you, up in the hills. We must meet him in another shape. Do you think that you two could handle him without having to kill him?"

"Well, boss, a day er so ago we'd 'a' said we could han'le anything that wore brichaloons, an' walked on two legs. After ther way you crawled over us, reckon ef we begun ter brag you'd only smile a smole, an' that would be tellin' us we lied. But we're willin' ter try him a fly ef we git ther chance when we ain't got ther drop. Thar's a old account 'twixt him and us that we're willin' ter try ter straighten up. Ef thar's a slip, though, he will hev ter go over ther range. We couldn't afford ter let him be rovin' 'round loose, an' knowin' that we was alive an' kickin'."

"If he is hurt I could not blame you, though

I would rather have him in my hands alive and unharmed."

"An' we would jest ez leave hand him over to Hard Luck. You see they would hang him, sure; but we dunno quite so plain what you would be doin' with him. An' ef you turned him loose it would be mighty unhealthy fur us."

"Do not be alarmed about that. The cup of his iniquity is full. When I have seen him, and done with him, I will see that he receives his reward. First and foremost, however, I want you to scout around the cabin of John Golden, and see how things are going there; if the girl is at home; if her father has returned. If she is there, do not worry about Kennedy till I call you off, but keep watch night and day. If Kennedy comes, nail him if you can. If you can't, follow him—for he will take the girl with him. I should have set you on sooner, but something unforeseen happened, and I was unable to arrange, until now I am afraid it is too late."

"And what about John Golden?"

"You have seen him since he has been living near to this camp?"

"Once er twice, boss."

"And did not recognize him for any one that you knew long ago?"

"Never met any one afore that looked like him."

"Are you certain that he is not King Kennedy himself?"

"Ef you bin barkin' up that tree, you missed it big. Don't mind, seein' it's you, ter say thet we hed an eye on him, an' was figgerin' how his strong box would pan out ef we had ter strike somewhar ter make a raise. We know he ain't King."

"The chances are that neither the girl nor her so-called father will be found there. We are too late. He has struck before us. If you find that the cabin is empty, one of you remain near the balance of the night, and the other can come to tell me. I will have more to say then, though the chances are that I will want you to finish your work here in Hard Luck. You are two worthless vagabonds, and I doubt if you have the nerve that you once had, but I intend to pay you well if you stand by me; and you will serve an old grudge of yours at the same time. Now, make the best of your way to the cabin. Buck can get back in two hours, and he will find me at Barney's. There will be crowd enough afoot to enable him to speak to me without being noticed. In two hours, remember. You will not be apt to find me much sooner—or any later."

"He knows a heap, an' I can't say it too often," said Steve, as they pursued their way at a rapid gait. "Ef we knowed half ez much, what big money we could make. But I'm bettin' that he's right. We'll find ther cabin empty an' ther bird skipped. This game war begun afore, an' this are ther second hand."

The money that, with their limited knowledge, they did see in the affair was big enough to make them prompt in their movements. They gauged themselves by the time their employer had given them, and in two hours by the clock Buck Banker was whispering into the ear of Howard Bromwell:

"Nary sign ov ther girl at the cabin—and there's blood on ther floor."

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS HAZZARD MAKES A CALL.

THE only hotel of any prominence in Hard Luck was the one kept by Barney Blake. There were other places where a man could obtain board and lodging; but the stage stopped at Barney's and he had all the floating population that was worth housing; and the most of the aristocrats of the camp who did not keep house for themselves were to be found on Barney's books.

The dude who had made his appearance in Hard Luck for the first time the previous day was domiciled there, and on the morning after the affair at the Odeon slept until rather a late hour. Barney was neither in the habit of calling his boarders who did not rise in time for breakfast, nor did the table wait for them. He said that they eat as much as they could possibly hold whenever they sat down, and consequently if they missed a meal he was that much ahead, and he was running the house to make money, and not for the benefit of men who were too lazy to put the grub in their potato-traps after he had taken the trouble to have it cooked and they had it paid for.

For this reason, when the gentleman who was entered on the register as Patrick McGinnis, made his appearance in a rather disheveled condition and inquired for Phelim in the fewest words that would convey the idea, Blake looked the young man all over in not the best of humors, and responded that he knew nothing of the individual.

The helplessness that his actions for the next half-hour seemed to indicate would have moved a heart of stone—though it did not affect Barney Blake a particle except so far as it excited his contempt.

The ways and means in a frontier hotel seemed altogether unknown to him, and he wandered around for a time with every appearance of a

man who wanted desperately to ask questions, and absolutely couldn't. Then he disappeared, and he was seen no more at Barney's until the bell rung for dinner.

He did his duty at the table without offering any suggestions, and then retired to his bunk to sleep.

That practically finished up the day for him. Yet Mr. McGinnis was not absolutely devoid of perception; and he had dropped to the ways of the house, even if he did not admire them. After a long sleep, and a trifle of what might be called daydreaming, he put his feet languidly on the floor and looked around.

The disgust in his face was certainly not simulated. For a duke—even for a duke incog.—the surroundings were not attractive. He shook his head slowly, and murmured:

"Disgusting, aw, 'pon honnaw."

Then he drew on his boots, which were beginning to look worse for wear, and was just rising to his feet when there came a rap at his door. He looked up in a startled way, gave another glance at the poverty of his surroundings, and then softly said:

"Aw, come in."

To the dismay of the young man when the door opened, as it did upon his permission, a lady dressed in deep mourning stood upon the threshold.

He looked around him helplessly, stretched out both hands with a gesture that showed his supreme contempt of his surroundings, and then muttered:

"Disgusting, aw, don'tchaw know."

Then a small boy, who had hitherto remained in the background, came hastily forward and looked around for himself, at the same time taking hold of the lady's hand.

"Ther kid's hit ther mark ther fu'st clatter," was his remark, as he led her to the only seat of which the room could boast—an inverted soap-box.

"It ain't no boodore, fur a lady ter warm her heels in, an' that's a fact; but ez Miss Hazzard's slightly hard ov seein', it ain't nothin' ter be 'polergizin' ov. She wants ter see yer—which in course she can't—an' fur next best she'll say a word er two. Ez she's able ter talk fur all both, you needn't excite yerself. She's a bizness woman frum ther word go, an' ain't askin' fur more than yer got in ther shop—which are a lucky thing fur you. Ef I hedn't seen yer ketch on ter Miss Myrtle las' night, blammed ef I wouldn't think she were foolin' away time awful, comin' 'round ter speak to you, but a cove what kin use his muskel don't hev ter hev so much brains. So long. I'm waitin' outside, an' when this here conclave are over you kin w'issel, an' you'll find me 'round ter lead her home ag'in."

"I came, sir, to express my thanks for your gallant efforts last night in behalf of my niece. I should have done so sooner, but you will understand how shocked I have been by her disappearance, and how wholly my mind was taken up with thoughts of her probable danger. As that boy has informed you, I am unable to see, and have to trust the guidance of my steps to another. I seldom leave my room except when compelled; and heretofore my niece has been the one who guided my steps. In her absence it seemed to be impossible to call upon you. This good lad, however, happened to come to my residence, sent on an errand, and I pressed him into service. You understand that I am the aunt of the unfortunate girl who last night fell from the trapeze, at the Odeon, into your arms, and who was afterward abducted in such a desperate manner. There seems to have been some effort made to retake her, or at least to discover what has become of her, but, so far as I have heard, without success. I thought it possible that you might be of some assistance. From your voice I should judge that you are not accustomed to the ways of the West, and I shall not urge you to put yourself into the ways of a danger that you do not understand. I shall simply renew my thanks, and withdraw, in the hope that I may yet have Myrtle restored in safety to my arms."

Several times had Miss Hazzard paused during her address, as if to allow the young man to offer some suggestion; but he as often simply gasped for an instant as if on the point of speaking, and then said nothing. As a result, if she was not disconcerted, she did not feel as if she had made a very brilliant address.

Now, when she came to a full stop, something was absolutely required from him, and with a struggle he managed to gasp out:

"Most happy, aw, 'pon honnaw, don'tchaw know."

The words, or the tones appeared to have a strange effect. Miss Hazzard turned her ear toward him, listening with almost painful eagerness, her hands clasped in front of her. When he shrunk back, somewhat exhausted, she leaned forward.

"Who are you, young man? In mercy's name tell me. It is years since I heard that voice—so long ago that it could not have belonged to you, to say nothing of the widely different surroundings. What is your mission here?—for mission you must have, to have wandered so far away from your home. Tell me. Are you alone? For whom are you searching?"

"Aw, better ask Phelim, and he is not here, don'tchaw know."

The stately drawl of the young man allayed the excitement of Miss Hazzard. What would have irritated some women beyond endurance simply calmed her.

"You come well by your semi-idiocy. Your father was like you at your age, making allowance for the degeneracy of a generation. And yet he afterward became more of a man than his youth promised. Hugh Richmond he was called; but afterward I knew that he was entitled to a nobler name. What matter, though? It was then too late to make any difference. Had he seen me, he would have fled from me as from a ghost. I doubt not that he has warned you of me, if he knew that you had any design of visiting the Western hemisphere. Or did he send you? Speak the truth, if one of your race ever can do such a thing, under any circumstances."

More and more interested did the young man become as Miss Hazzard proceeded. He did not evince any anger at the ugly sarcasm of her words, and actually appeared on the verge of finding his tongue.

"Aw, weally, don'tchaw know! Who are you? It seems vewy queer; quite disgusting, don'tchaw know."

"Who am I?" answered Miss Hazzard, rising from her seat on the soap-box, and actually towering above him.

"I am Rhoda Wilder, and the sister of the unfortunate Rhea Wilder who was your own father's lawful wife. Until you disclose the object of your visit to this region I refuse to say another word. If then I find that repentance lays behind it I may have much to tell you. There are some things that may be of interest to you, if not of profit."

Her attitude was one of listening, and yet she turned away from him, as though she was about to pass through the open door.

"Mr. McGinnis" remained unmoved by her earnestness and her mystery. He stared at her, but said nothing. When she stepped uncertainly toward the door he did not offer to arrest her steps by the words that she was so anxious to hear; but stared at her as though he only thought she was a bigger lunatic than himself.

Her blindness was forgotten by both, and she would have gone stumbling out had not her guide, the boy who had announced his intention of waiting outside, come rushing forward with a yell.

"Hip-hip-hip!" he howled. "This here way, Miss Hazzard; they've got her, sure ez eggs!"

And at the same time a shout, that rose into a roar, came floating in through the open window. Then there was the noise of hurrying feet; and the clatter of horses' hoofs on the hard street, that stopped, as they listened, in front of the cabin occupied by Miss Hazzard and her niece.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIGHT AT THE FORD.

FROM his place of concealment Phelim could see that the cattle were being driven in haste. In front of them galloped a horseman, who was increasing the distance between him and the herd at every stride; and when, after a little, the whole of the drove had debouched from the pass, he could distinguish half a dozen men in the rear, who were plying their whips, and probably shouting, with an energy that denoted some special cause for excitement.

"Faith, an' it's somethin' or somebody that's driv' thim harrud. Av they ain't blood on the moon afoore long it's 'way off that Oi am. Phat was Bowlding he doing? Oi'd loike to see him just too well. Av they make the crossin' it's some trouble they may be giving us."

Bowlding, however, was invisible; and as he could not even frame a guess at which point of the compass to look for him, the Irishman continued to watch the herd as it made its rapid way toward the river.

So much interested was he in the sight that it was only when he saw that the drivers were redoubling their efforts to keep up the speed, that he glanced around in search of the cause.

There was nothing in their immediate rear, but as his eyes swept along the low range he understood without any great effort. From the second of the three passes came a second body of horsemen, at least a score in number, who waved their arms and gave other indications of the earnestness with which they were carrying on the pursuit.

It was rather far to make out with exactness who these men were, but Phelim was almost certain that he could distinguish both whites and reds in the party, and thought that he understood the whole story. The men with the cattle belonged to the robbers of the Lifters' League. Those in the rear were the men who had been robbed, and they were making a mighty effort to come up with the raiders before the river was crossed. Would not this draw out Lieutenant Murray and his squad, to the aid of their comrades? And if so there might be a chance to get sight of the prisoner, and perhaps effect a rescue. If Bowlding had not disappeared this would have been the chance of the season.

Unfortunately he did not know in which direction to look to find the party in whose hands was the prisoner he so much wanted to see. So far he had seen nothing of them, since his attention had been attracted to the opposite side of the river. If Bowlding had only given him a hint as to where the men were to be found he would have run some risks to get nearer to their hiding-place. As it was, he could only wait and watch until something developed.

In the race for the ford the raiders appeared to be likely to hold their advantage. Those behind were going two feet to their one; but the start was so great that it would be impossible to head off the cattle, though the bank might be reached a trifle after the herd had got into the water. It would be a good time for vengeance, even if there was little profit in it.

Very few men could have watched the movements of the two bodies of men without becoming more or less excited by the view. It began like a panorama, but every moment it grew more vivid a picture until it was merged into a drama of life that was too real, too thrilling to leave the blood of the spectator cool. An average man would have felt his pulses quicken, and his breath come fast; and McGallagin was not an average man by any means. When the foremost of the herd dashed into the river, and the half dozen men who had been devoting all their energies to urging the cattle on suddenly turned at bay, handling their Winchesters with the air of men who meant business, it was hard work for him to refrain from springing to his feet with a shout of encouragement and admiration. The odds were so great, the chances so strong against them, that it looked as though the little band were deliberately courting death, rather than give up their booty.

In the river was a scene of confusion, that under other circumstances would have made a picture worth looking at. As they entered the water the cattle halted to drink. In fact, it was only the scent of the water that had kept them up to the rate of speed to which they had been forced on the appearance of the pursuing force. Now that they had the seeming opportunity to slake their thirst they thought of nothing else. Crowding, pushing, routing, one against the another, one on top of another, some going down to be trampled to death under the feet of still coming hundreds, others pushed bodily along to make room for the other coming hundreds, the stream was black at the entrance to the ford. No living man could for the present disentangle that knot, or venture with safety to urge it on until the water craze had somewhat abated. All this Phelim took in at a glance, that was given more to search for the man who had ridden out from the pass in the advance, than because he cared to see his expectations verified. He had expected nothing else, and for him it had little interest while there there was the probability of a wilder scene occurring on the bank, and beyond.

The man had vanished completely—to his fleeting regret—and that left him with nothing more important to do than to watch the fight for the ford.

It came faster and harder than he had expected.

Though the trailers could see the rifles that were looking their way, and knew the desperate and deadly nature of the men that held them, they never slackened their speed, even when they saw that the cattle were already in the river. Their own weapons were evidently inferior in range. While Phelim could not distinguish the make he had no doubt that the superior force had only the ordinary carbines, that needed closer quarters to make them effective against the further shooting Winchesters of the raiders. If that was the case they evidently intended to remedy the defect as quickly as possible, by shortening the distance between. If anything, their speed increased, and straight for the river they rode.

The distance shortened rapidly—and perhaps the difference in numbers was only a trifle less rapidly diminished. The marksmen on the bank were very cool, and their aim very deadly. When they opened fire it was with a steady deliberation that emptied saddles after a surprising fashion. Though the fire was returned, yet it seemed to be without effect. A moving mark is not so hard to hit by one who is stationary, as is a stationary mark by one who is on the move.

Of course every shot did not drop a man, but many were deadly, and more gave wounds.

The fierce charge never wavered, and it was not long before the two parties were within pistol-shot range, and the assailants riding as though they intended to force a hand-to-hand engagement. In that case it looked as though they must ride the others down by mere weight of numbers. Then there were the cattle to look after. If they attacked three to one there were still enough to drive the herd back, after its maddening thirst was allayed. It would be natural for the animals to turn back in the direction of their own feeding-grounds, while it would require time and skill to force them forward across the river.

All this was understood well enough by both sides, and if it increased the courage of the one

party, it certainly did not appear to daunt the other. No signs were there of wavering. On the contrary, when the charge was within a few rods of them the raiders, in one compact mass, darted forward with a wild yell, that shook the nerve of the leading men. The speed of the head of the disorderly column slackened visibly.

It was unfortunate for them, in more ways than one.

Those behind came on as before, and there was more than one collision, in spite of the fact that these men were all horsemen of the most skillful kind. After that there could not but be some confusion, and though the men on the flanks kept up the firing, it was without much effect. Then the raiders struck them in the midst of the disorder, and for a time there was the liveliest kind of pistol-practice at short range. The Men of the Moon dashed along the line, never exactly entering it, but rolling it back on itself as they moved, now on this flank and again on that, until all it needed was a savage thrust or two from near the rear, and a fiercer demonstration than ever on the front, to turn the waver into a flight.

The thrust came. Three or four fresh men galloped into the fray; and they made noise enough for a dozen, while they shot with a cool precision that told terribly. Then the enemy was in retreat, and the raiders were in possession of the ground.

The first man of the squad was Lieutenant Murray.

"It was a close thing, but we got here just in time, Camp," was his salutation, as he ranged up alongside of the leader of the original party. "We didn't expect you to be along before sundown, or we might have made it a little sooner. Time enough as it is, however. No one seems to be very badly damaged, on our side, and if they once begin counting up the wounded on theirs they will find enough to do to keep them busy till the cattle get over the ford. After that they can have all the fun they want. We have the dead medicine on them if they come at us twice as strong. How did they come to strike you?"

"Better late than never; and I am not certain that it was not best exactly as it happened. They must have organized an army and nosed around till they struck the trail by chance. The first thing we knew they were closing in on us, and we had to hurry things up to get the cattle into the river before they reached us. I thought of them first and took no chances, or I would have given them a hustle in the pass. There are enough of them to eat us up if they could once get hold. Hope they won't turn around till we get the stock safely landed on the other bank."

"No danger now. I sent a couple of men down to attend to that, and I guess the best part of them are out of the water by this time. I see that Antonio is with you. What did he say had become of the other man that started with him?"

"The Irishman? Says he had a tumble by his horse making a misstep, and that he left him for dead on the prairie, last night. Couldn't swear to it, as orders were urgent, and there was no time to lose. If he had lost five minutes then it is likely that we would not all have been here now, so I guess we can afford to leave the Irishman to his fate. He can take care of himself as well as if there were a dozen to help him, if he came to his senses, and if he didn't there's nothing lost."

"Humph! I would feel better if Antonio was a little more certain. Dennis is a tough little nut, and in none too good odor with the captain. If he is at large there is no telling what he will not attempt to do."

"And nothing will it all amount to. Perhaps Tony don't care to tell too much. I'll wager what you choose that you never see him again unless you hunt up his corpse. But those fellows do not seem to be in a hurry to come on again, and we may as well get down to the ford. The less fighting on this side of the river the better. I only wish I had time to show them the stuff the raiders are made of. When we shoot to kill it makes a heap of difference."

CHAPTER XVI.

A GALLANT RESCUE.

CAMP made his decision just in time. There were several dead men lying between him and the river, and several others that were wounded and dismounted. It was not in human nature for the lately discomfited force to see this without making at least some show of an effort to recover their dead and wounded. Great as was their respect for the foe that had just routed them, the Mexicans and their allies had re-formed and were beginning to move slowly forward. There were still three to one in numbers and could make a hard fight at close quarters.

The rustlers moved off at a slow trot and with the air of men that rather invited an attack. They halted an instant at a spot where several of the wounded were groaning on the ground, gazed at them, and then Camp, looking at the company that was coming on at a more rapid rate since they saw that the enemy was in retreat, pointed downward. The gesture was

significant and understood. When he moved on those in the rear followed until they came to the spot and then paused. As the rustler had suggested, there was good employment there. Those who had fallen were the men of note among their fellows and they could not be left there in cold blood.

Once at the crossing, and the rustlers lost no time. With the exception of a few stragglers, the last of the herd was being urged up the opposite bank by the men who had been detailed for the duty, and who understood their business thoroughly well.

Into the stream plunged Camp and his men, and though a score or so of men came dashing down to the bank, they were too late to catch any of the raiders in the water. Up the opposite bank they filed, and after that the advantage was altogether on the other side.

As long as there was a show of resistance Camp did not believe there would be any effort made to cross the river. Half a dozen of his men were stationed on the bank, so as to command the ford, while the rest followed straight on after the herd, which was now under good control, and very little likely to stampede. Once more the cattle were on the move as a herd; and they were heading straight for the very gulch where Bowlding and the Irishman had taken up their quarters. Unless something occurred to alter their course, they would strike it at about the spot where Phelim had been in hiding when Bowlding left him to his own devices.

So shut in was the gulch that it is possible the noise of the distant firing would not have penetrated there; and in that case very unfortunate would it have been for the Irishman to have remained there. In front still rode the man who had been the leader on the other side of the river; and he had keen eyes. He would, without a doubt, have discovered the presence of the interloper; and what the result would have been is not hard to guess.

But Phelim was no longer in the gulch—nor even within a mile or more of the spot. At that precise period of time he was urging his mustang over the prairie, and near to his elbow rode the woman that he had rescued from the camp of the rustlers.

It was the merest chance in the world.

When the charge on the Men of the Moon began, he watched it with an excitement that gradually rose to something more than fever heat. With such odds against them, his sympathies were all on the side of the raiders, and the time came when he could stand it no longer. Though it was doubtful if he could get there in time to help against the long odds, he sprang to his feet, ran down the incline, and dashed into the gulch. He was fleet of foot, and before three minutes had passed he was in the saddle, and speeding back to take the nearest course to the river.

It was when he came out once more on the ground of the little divide, that he saw something that altered his intentions. Lieutenant Murray and his men were riding like mad toward the river, and the fray.

Phelim had not a doubt that they were going to the rescue; and under the circumstances he did not care to ride with them. They might recognize him as the fictitious Dennis of the previous night, and stop long enough to put him out of the way of any further mischief-making.

The natural cheek of the Irishman might have carried him ahead if that had been all; but the idea flashed across his mind that if he followed back on the trail they were making, he would find the spot where they had left their prisoner, if indeed he had not been deceived when he and Ben Bowlding obtained the glimpse of them as they toiled over the hill.

He had come out fearlessly into view of any eyes that might be sweeping the ground, but with so much to see beyond, he was unwilling to take the risks of any one looking in that particular direction. The time saved was an offset to the risk.

When the rustlers were dashing into the river, Phelim had reached the trail they had left behind them; and after that it would have been plain sailing for a child even. Back he went, at racing speed, certain that his goal was the mouth of a gulch, that he could now see. As he went along he laid out the plan of his campaign, which was simple enough.

Unless the squad under the command of Murray had been reinforced, he knew that but one man had been left with the prisoner—always supposing that there was one. The rest were in the charge that was swirling away to the support of their comrades across the river. This one man he hoped to be able to deceive, as he had deceived the whole gang the night before. He would try again to pass for the Dennis whom he had so cleverly disposed of, until he could get in to close quarters. After that, if there was a necessity for dropping the man, Phelim had confidence enough in his own resources to believe that a way would open up by which it could be done.

Sure enough, he rode right on up the gulch without challenge or meeting with the man that should have been on guard, until he drew rein

in the very midst of the camp. Then, a sharp hail came down from the bank above him.

"Hello, there! What brings you here, you infernal old fraud? Did they send you back to get a man for the work that you haven't the sand to take hold of? Or did you skip as usual, when the bullets began to fly? The sooner we get rid of such cattle the sooner we will have pards all around that we know we can tie to."

"Bad luck to yer oogle mug!" shouted back the supposititious Dennis. "Av it wasn't for the hurry Oi would make ye ate thim worruds av it took me loife to thry it. Liffenant Murray sez to saddle up a horse for the gurrul, an' be moighty quick about it. It's on the move we will be afore long, an' whin we start it will be wid a jump. Av he knew how ye wor perched up thar loike a hump on a log, it's little you'd be iver throwin' up me failin's to me ag'in."

And as he spoke, Dennis handled his revolver in a way that suggested that he would not mind administering a corrective shot himself.

The fellow came scrambling down in haste. He had discovered that there was nothing to be seen from his perch, anyhow; and he was aware that he had been neglecting his duty. As for Phelim's appearance—he had not the faintest suspicion that it was not all right. The courage of the real Dennis was not exactly at par, and he would be the man that would be chosen as a messenger to the rear.

The message as delivered was one made up on the spur of the moment, but was well chosen. The little Irishman had seen that a girlish figure was resting herself wearily on some blankets, and that several unsaddled horses were tethered near.

In haste the man saddled not only one but both of the horses, and then approached the captive.

"Sorry, miss, but I'm afraid that you will have to take another dose of horseback. There is some heavy fighting going on over there, and the lieutenant seems to be getting ready for a bolt. You won't have to move till further orders, but if things look squally the orders may come any minute. Something must have gone wrong. Unless he had been hurried Camp would not have reached the ford until sometime after dark."

"Av yez would lit her sthand by the horse it moight save toime whin the liffenant comes."

Phelim had seen everything, so that he had noticed that the prisoner had hurriedly raised her head at the first sound of his voice, and had been watching and listening intently. Her face was in the shadow, so he could not well note its expression, but he believed she recognized him. At his suggestion she arose and came forward.

For the first time the camp-guard seemed ill at ease, as though he suspected that there was something not altogether right. His hand dropped to his revolver, and his eyes were on the girl as he stepped toward her.

"If you please, miss, don't tear your garments in your hurry. There will be plenty of time when the boss comes in; and what you want to be doing till that time is to be resting at your ease. Sorry to seem firm with a lady, but I really must insist."

"And so must Oi," exclaimed Phelim, right behind him, and as he spoke the Irishman brought down the butt of his clubbed revolver with stunning force on the head of the man. "Into the saddle wid you," he added, as the girl gave a low cry of alarm, and cowered back hearing the ominous thud of the blow. "It's a long roide forninst ye but Phelim McGallagin will take ye back safe with flying colors."

And then to himself he muttered, as she sprang into the saddle: "Be the rock ov Cashell, it's Gladys Golden afther all."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CRITICISM OF MCGINNIS.

THE shouting on the street, and the hurrying crowd, galvanized some life into Mr. McGinnis himself. He turned hastily to the window; and as it was open looked out, to see what it was that so strangely excited Hard Luck.

The cabin occupied by Miss Hazzard, as the reader has already been informed, was almost adjoining the hotel, and so there was a splendid opportunity to view the scene. The crowd was all there, and in its midst were two men, supporting the form of a young girl, who was weak from fatigue, but who answered the cordial reception with a wave of her hand, as her faltering steps tottered toward the doorway of the cabin. In the street stood two horses that had been hard ridden. Their flanks were wet with sweat, and they let their heads hang low, without offering to move from the spot where they had been abandoned.

At the door one of the men rapped gently. As there was no answer from within he tried the latch; to find that the bolt of the lock had been shot. When he turned to inform the others of the fact he saw a small boy forcing himself through the outskirts of the crowd, leading a lady by the hand. As he came he shouted:

"Git back, here. Don't yer see I'm bringin' in the party ther gal are dyin' ter see. Make room here, ter let ther fam'ly meetin' go on!"

At that a lane was formed, through which

Miss Hazzard tottered, until, at the doorstep, the girl dropped into her arms.

The reunion was more than interesting—it was affecting. The boisterous shouting and cheering stopped, and the crowd looked on in silence. When they saw Miss Hazzard stagger under the load that fell upon her, a dozen men started forward; but they were too late.

The two who brought back the missing girl had quietly picked up the two females; one of them with his shoulder opened the door before them, and all four disappeared within the house.

At that all Hard Luck, so far as it was there represented, gave a howl of indignation, and surged forward in a mighty wave, that bid fair to burst the door in.

This abrupt disappearance was looked upon with such disfavor, that every man at the moment felt it as a personal affront; and the popularity of the late favorite was in danger of falling below par too far to ever admit of her resuming the position of star at the Odeon.

A few moments ago and her return was a matter for public rejoicing. Now, it was openly asserted that if they were to be deprived of their rights in the matter it would have been just as well if she had not returned at all. The mob at Hard Luck was inconstant, and at times unreasonable.

Fortunately, before this thing had gone on long enough to effect any permanent change in the minds of those who were most excited, the door again opened, and Mr. Jim Flemming came out.

"Gents," he said, looking around him in his coolest manner. "I reckon some of you know me, and that I can talk as well as the next man, and a little faster than two women, what's both ov 'em in a dead faint. What we want now inside ain't half their population ov Hard Luck, but a doctor and a woman er two. If somebody can fetch 'em along in the shake ov a lamb's tail, they may save a couple of lives; fur my pard in there don't know any more about nussin' a sick female, than I do whar ter look fur a sawbones. An' ef you'll jest hump yerselves ter git 'em, some ov you, ther rest ov us kin adjourn over to Barney's, and I'll tell you all I know about what seems ter me a mighty queer case. But if yer won't listen ter reason, an' keep on howling around here, I won't answer fur consequences."

The appeal brought the crowd to their senses. A rush was made for the office of Dr. Snagely by three or four and as many more started off to hunt up nurses of the gentler sex. The balance allowed themselves to be led away. From Barney's an eye could still be kept on the cabin, yet the story of the rescue could be learned at first hand.

It is not necessary to repeat the story told by Flemming, since it is already known to the reader. So far as the meeting with the young lady was concerned, he kept to the exact facts. Since then, nothing had been seen of the raiders; and all that he had to relate was soon told.

Meantime the doctor had been found and hurried to his patients, whom he found in no danger and under the care of several women who had answered promptly to the call for their services. His stay was short, and by the time that Flemming had finished his story Snagely was in the throng, ready to make a report on the present condition of the ladies.

"Sne is all right, gentlemen," was the announcement; "and wishes Hard Luck to understand that she is thankful for the generous sympathy which she has received. Unless something happens to prevent she will appear on the stage at the Odeon, to-night, and convince you that she has not been hurt at all, or frightened so badly that she cannot hold her own on the trapeze."

The intelligence was received with enthusiasm; everybody cheered as in duty bound; and Miss Myrtle Mead was reinstated in the good graces of the men who had but a few moments before been ready to forswear their allegiance.

By this time Buckle had heard the news, and was as much excited as any one. He came hurrying past, on his way to call on the restored star; and stopped long enough to hear the intelligence. He took the doctor aside, and with some show of interest asked him if he thought it would be safe for the young lady to attempt to make her word good. Ed Buckle was a man that looked after his own interests as well as the next man, but he would not accept a sure house for the evening if the result was to be disastrous to a too confident woman.

"Don't be alarmed, Buckle. I pledge you my word that the young lady is as cool as a cucumber, and has nerves and muscles of steel. Of course she showed some emotion at being restored to her aunt; but that was only natural. She wouldn't be worth much as a card if there was no human nature behind it all. When she gets to the Odeon she will forget every thing but the business before her; and if you keep those rustlers out of her sight I will vouch for it that she will be as fit for the performance as she ever was in her life. Of course it will not be advisable to extend her part of the programme, even if the boys do forget themselves, and ask for a few extra frills. Cut it short

and she will be all right for to-night—in fact, all the better for it. But to-morrow night she will want a rest. By that time reaction will come, and she will do better in bed than on the stage."

There was no nonsense about the doctor, and Buckle felt that his opinion could be relied on, unless there were some unexpected developments. He thanked Snagely, and then went on to the house. He had never been anxious to see the inside of it, but under the circumstances he thought it was better to have the evidences of his own eyes; and, besides, congratulations were in order.

Gradually the crowd dispersed. Every man had his say before going, so that it took some time for things to settle down to their customary quiet. When the last knot had broken up it was sundown, and the supper bell was ringing, to call in the boarders at Barney Blake's Hotel.

Of course the drift toward the Odeon that evening was almost unprecedented. Every man in the camp had heard the particulars of the strange affair, and of the intention of the young lady to go through her performance as though nothing had happened, and most of them would have pawned their coat and boots if no other means to be present was available. A jam was what Buckle expected, and a jam was what he had.

The first part went along with a swing. No one paid much attention to it, and the waits were shortened in deference to an unexpressed but well understood public sentiment. Fully a quarter of an hour earlier than usual the orchestra struck up the well-known music that accompanied the act; and the heroine of the evening, without announcement, darted on the stage, and with the regular professional salutation to the audience caught the trailing rope that hung from the high trapeze, and swung herself lightly from the floor.

Never had such a storm of applause arisen since the Odeon had been built. It made the very roof tremble. Seated on the bar the popular idol swung idly for a moment, looking down at the crowded house with an air of triumph. Then she held up her hand, as if requesting silence. In the lull that followed the gesture she touched her fingers to her lips, and waved them gently toward the audience. Then, without waiting for the renewed storm of applause to subside, she sprang upright upon the bar and began her evolutions.

The reception and the audience were inspiring, no doubt. At any rate, the patrons of the house had never been treated to such a performance before. There was a reckless daring in every motion, an utter fearlessness, that more than captivated. The act itself, without any reference to the performance, would have thrilled if not driven wild the staidest of the spectators; and Hard Luck just then was in danger of changing their idol into a divinity.

And then, before they realized that the display was about to close, a rope was swinging from the trapeze, down which the girl came sliding recklessly head-first, and sustained only by a single turn around her ankle. It was more like a headlong dive than a calculated descent; and when a sort of shiver ran all over the house, as the excited spectators were expecting to see her go crashing to the stage, she flung herself from the rope, revolved once lightly in the air, and her feet struck squarely but lightly on the stage. A wave of the shapely hand, and she darted away behind the scenes, whence Buckle led her a moment later blushing but perfectly self-possessed, to bow gratefully in recognition of the admiring plaudits of the frenzied throng.

It was then that the gentleman who traveled under the name of McGinnis, in a tone so low that it was caught only by one or two men who sat in the neighboring box, murmured:

"Disgusting, aw, don'chaw knaw—but it's weally the w'ong woman."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED ATTACK, AND BROMWELL PLAYS CHIEF.

WHEN every one else seemed to be so excited, it did not appear likely that the remark of the young man would be noticed. It was not made in a loud tone; and the way he spoke was not, at best, very intelligible. Then, there was no one very near to him at the time. Altogether, it looked safe enough that the heretical opinion was neither heard nor shared by any one else.

Nevertheless, it had scarcely left the mouth of the young man when he seemed to think that he had been guilty of a mistake that it was not altogether safe to have made. He looked around him in an anxious way, and shrunk visibly, as though expecting a blow.

As far as he could see, no one had overheard his remark, and after a little he settled himself again to observing the performance.

As might have been expected, after the enthusiasm there followed a chill. The balance of the programme was of little interest, to any one, and when the curtain went down more than half of the spectators had drifted out into the bar-room. Though the duke sat the whole thing through religiously, he was no more entertained than the rest; and when the house was emptying itself he followed the stream.

Once in the bar-room he stared around in a dazzled sort of way. There was not a familiar face to be seen, and no one offered to make his acquaintance.

For a few minutes he stood around, listening to the hum of conversation that was going on, trying to get a little idea of what was being said. Everything was so mixed up, so many were talking at once, and the voices were all so unfamiliar, that it was hard to follow any one conversation far enough to make sense of it until he noted one man in particular, who had a group of half a dozen listeners, who were allowing him to tell his story without interruption, except so far as an occasional question went. Toward this group he sidled, and having listened awhile, discovered that it was Jim Flemming, telling the story of the rescue. As there was a long preliminary, explaining how he and his pard happened to be on the spot, he had just about reached the point where the strange Irishman had appeared on the scene.

For the first time his part in the affair was given circumstantially, and the hearers recognized him at once.

"Why, blame my eyes, ef that wer'n't the feller that made the big fight, right in the house here. He's bin missin', an' nobody knowed where he went to. Good fur him! There ain't no use fur flies ter buzz 'round him. He got on ther trail, did he? What's become ov him?"

Flemming expressed his surprise, and asked for further information himself. It was the first he had heard—he said—in regard to the part that Phelim had played at Hard Luck. He knew that there had been some little resistance, but no one had told him of the individuals who made it. When he learned the particulars he appeared dumfounded.

"I swear! An' there was me a-blinking that he was one of the gang himself. Wonder what's become ov him. Ef he don't get in soon, I'll be looking after him myself. When I asked him to go back he went along like a little lamb. He looked like the sort that is always ready for a row; and I was mighty much afraid he would raise one on me before we got away. If he ever stumbles across pard and me, he will be wanting to even up for the trick that we put on him; and I wouldn't blame him."

Then Flemming went on with his story, which included the reception when the town was reached, and the fainting of the young lady when the danger was all over. There were various interruptions, and afterward numerous speculations as to the reasons for the desperate act of the rustlers; and after all, the explanation that had been given by the girl when she first met them was the only one that amounted to anything. As the outlaws had told her, there was money in it. How, or why, was more than they could see, and the mystery became more interesting the longer it was considered.

The duke listened attentively. Once or twice his lips moved as though he intended to speak, but they closed again, and he slowly stroked the light mustache that graced his upper lip and remained in the background. He had at least learned something about Phelim.

For a wonder the whole story was given without any adjournment to the bar; but when it was over, one of the listeners remarked that it was dry work talking, and when, at the hint, every one made a movement, Jim happened to let his eye wander until it fell upon the young man, who had been sitting for some time almost where he could touch him.

"Hillo!" he exclaimed. "Who are you? I swear you don't belong to our crowd, and it looks mighty suspicious when a man that nobody knows for a gentleman, wrings himself in in that sort of a sneakin', underhanded way. We weren't talkin' about nothin' that the whole camp couldn't hear; but all ther same I don't like that sort ov work, an' I feel like kickin' hard. Next, you'll be up to ther bar, as big as any ov ther boys, an' expectin' me ter set 'em up. You better trot, now. Ef we ketch you 'round here when ther meetin's out, I wouldn't wonder ef thar war another dead duck on ther grass."

The sudden snarl of the man was a surprise, not only to the duke, but to the rest. To an unprejudiced mind it looked very much as though Jim Flemming had an object in view, and that object was fight.

The appearance of the young man might have been accepted as sufficient cause; though as far as Flemming was known he was not credited with the reputation of being one of the bad kind, willing to drop a man on account of frills or general defenselessness. So far as the spectators could see it was for one or the other of these two reasons.

As the young man known as McGinnis was not by any means as big a fool as he looked, he saw a little further into the game, and suspected that there was a third reason—and the only one that occurred to his mind was the unlucky exclamation as the lady trapezist retired from the stage. Yet he gave no sign, looking up at Jim in a bewildered sort of way, that was quite encouraging if he had any intention of carrying the affair through as he had begun it.

"Oh, you come, now. Get out of that. Got no tongue, have you? If you know what's good

for you you'll begin to talk. What yer got ter say fur yerself?"

The young man turned his face from one to the other of the listeners, in an anxious, almost entreating sort of way, and then the sole stock of his conversational trade bubbled out:

"Disgustin', aw, 'pon honnaw, don'chaw know."

Some one laughed at that, and the laugh did not improve the temper of Jim Flemming. He was only surly before, now he was a savage.

"You bet it's disgusting; and when Buckle comes ter mop up ther floor he'll swear a few at fresh young men that wring in where they 'don't belong. Last time of askin'. Are you goin' head first, or feet first?"

With the question Flemming's hand dropped down to a revolver, and he scowled malignantly. It required no great experience in such matters to see that he was testing the nerve of the duke, and with no very good intentions.

He found out all about it in a way that was as unexpected as it was unpleasant.

The head of the duke went down, and his whole body went forward as though it was discharged from a catapult. Flemming was disconcerted—if he had time to be anything. Instead of raising his arms for a grapple he tried to draw the pistol for which he was already reaching.

That gave the other the chance to get in his work. Before the weapon was half way out of its scabbard a pair of steel like arms entwined Jim's waist, pinioning down his arms, so that they could not be used for either attack or defense, and then he was lifted bodily from the floor.

It was no fair test of strength, as the gripe was one that gave every advantage to the man that had it; but it showed that he had no mean skill in the art of wrestling, and that he knew what he was about when he darted for a close. Up in the air he held the writhing figure of the man who had insulted him, and then, with a quick twist and a powerful wrench, he brought him to the floor.

As he managed to loosen his hold an instant before the crash, and draw his knees up so that they alighted fairly on the stomach of the under man, it was no blame to Flemming if the breath was knocked out of his body, and that he lay there quivering, and striving with a pitiful gasp to catch his breath.

The duke did not wait to see the result of the fall. At the crash he sprung to his feet again, and gave a backward leap, that took him almost to the wall, and safely out of the knot of men that had been talking with Flemming.

Had he been a typical bad man he would have had his hands full by this time; but he made no motion to draw a weapon. He kept his eyes roving around, to watch for an attack from the others, and to see that Flemming made no unexpected motion toward renewing the conflict, but he evidently did not contemplate any offensive movement.

The wordy part of the controversy had not attracted any attention outside of the immediate circle; but the sound of the fall did. There was a surge in that direction, and it was not so certain that the rush would not go right over the little man, who stood alone, with an anxious look in his eyes, but without the least evidence of a desire to retreat.

He saw it coming, but uttered no word. With an almost imperceptible motion of his foot he kicked a chair in front of him, over which an incautious assailant might easily stumble, held his hands low down, but clinched, and awaited the developments that would no doubt appear fast enough.

After what he had done for the present idol of the town, one would have thought that there would have been some one there who would have stepped in on the side of the stranger; but there was not even a warning cry, and it looked as though he was to be left to the tender mercies of the roughs who led the savage swoop that came driving down upon him. These men had never been seen training with Flemming, but they took up his cause without a word of urging or explanation.

If some one had not pulled Jim Flemming out of the way it is more than likely the feet of the crowd would have done him more harm than his fall. He lay right in the way, and no one noticed him except one of those to whom he had been telling the story of the finding of the young lady. It was a solid rush, and a cruel one—and it stopped as quickly as it started. Right in front of the duke stepped a man, and in each hand he held a revolver.

"If you please, gentlemen—one at a time. If there is any one man that wants to take up the quarrel of his fallen chief, let him go ahead; but if a dozen are anxious to get in their work they had better decide on the order of their going. This young man has only defended himself, and I shall see that he is not double-banked, or else know the reason why."

It was Howard Bromwell that was speaking.

CHAPTER XIX.

IT IS BAD TO HOLLOW TILL YOU ARE OUT OF THE WOODS.

It was the first information that Hard Luck had received that the more than middle-aged

semi-invalid, who had for some time been seen on their streets when the weather was nice, intended to set up for a chief. He looked so old, worn and tottery that the very idea was ridiculous, and his words were greeted with a hoarse laugh by the leading ruffian of the gang that had been bearing down on the duke.

Yet the action had its effect, for the lot halted, as ordered. It is not entirely pleasant to look into the barrels of a pair of revolvers when the man behind them says, shoot. A touch of the finger requires no great skill, and a fool is more apt to give it sometimes than a wise man.

Coincident with the halt more than one hand dropped toward the weapons that were conveniently displayed. If the man was a fool, he might be a dangerous fool. Even if his speech was received with a laugh there was no one willing to take many chances.

"Ah, that is what I like to see," said Bromwell, and his voice, which had raised a little in the first moment of interference, dropped to its usual husky pitch.

"You want to see who it is that is talking to you and just how safe it would be to go ahead when he stands in the road. Well, it is an old man that has counted sixty years go by, and some of them seemed to be long enough for a dozen. I am not very strong and it has been some time since I found myself in such a crowd, but I feel myself as much at home as if I was a couple of years younger. If you think that there is any fun left in the old man, don't worry about his gray hair, but step over the dead line and find out what is behind it."

"Out of the way, old man! We have nothing against you, as long as you behave yourself; but if you keep up the bluff against the town you will find yourself where the dogs don't bite, and the rain can't reach you. It's that young fraud, back there, that we are after. He would have had to talk to the town, anyhow; and Flemming has only brought him out a little sooner. We did think of walking him out to the edge of the camp with a rope on his neck, and then telling him that if he was found within a mile, in ten minutes by the clock, he would be on one end of the rope, and a tree on the other. But the way such a shabby-looking scoundrel as he is handled Jim makes us think there is no mistake, and we had better mix him and the rope up, right now."

"And that is the reward that Hard Luck has for the man that only last night saved the life of a woman; and afterward fought gallantly to save her from a fate that he might well suppose would be worse than death. If you were men here I would not have to stand by him. You would be his friends, all."

Bromwell looked around him with a sneer on his lips. He certainly was taking no pains to conciliate the overwhelming odds that was arrayed against him. It was a wonder that the men of the camp had not trampled him down before this. If his hair had been less gray, and his form less bent it is likely that the effort would have been made. But it was not exactly the thing to kill an elderly gentleman without giving him first a chance to get out of the way.

He had his chance, and did not take it. There was a silence after he spoke, and then followed the report of two or three pistols. It was not often that such a riot was started at the Odeon, and even in the excitement, those on the outside of the crowd, who had as yet taken no part in the affair, suspected that there must be some reason for it all, that did not appear on the surface.

At such close quarters it seemed as though the old gentleman must go down; yet that was the mistake of the season. It was the leading man of the assailing party, who dropped to the floor—and just in time to save himself from a bullet in his brain. He had flung up his own weapon, to take a snap-shot at the man who set himself in his way; and at the motion Bromwell had simply pulled the trigger of his own. The room grew dark with smoke, two or three other shots were fired; and then Buckle and three or four of his friends came rushing in, and laying about them with clubs that certainly had no cushions on the end. At the same time Ed shouted to the gang:

"If it's fun that you fellows want here, it is by the cord; and if it's business you are after, here you have it, chuck up. The man that pulls in my house to-night, has got to show good reasons or down goes his building, for good and all. Hold on, therel! You hear me?"

When Buckle went in with a club to quiet a riot in his house, he had a way of keeping a pistol handy, and using it on the slightest provocation. Unless the gang meant to settle him, after that warning, it was hands off, or croak. They had taken too much time, for Ed was bound to interfere if he found it going on when he was in reaching distance; and what was as much to the point, he had four of his patrons out of six on his side whenever he needed help to enforce his orders, or see him through a difficulty.

All this was well enough known, and some one—no one could tell who—evidently reconsidered his intentions. A shrill whistle rung through the house: and as if by magic, the riot was over. Half a dozen of those nearest to the club turned

toward Ed, holding up their hands, and one laughingly exclaimed:

"It's all over, boss. Give the switch a rest, and let us carry out our dead and badly wounded. If you have got onto us we may as well come down; but there wasn't any harm really meant. We were only after a little fun with the dude, till Jim could brace up and have a chance to get even. You like to see a couple having a good time yourself."

"One to one, and the gentlemen willing to pay for all the damage done, and I don't kick unless it's too bad a case of crowding. What's all this about, anyway?"

"You tell; I never can. It's a racket between Jim Flemming and the dude. Jim got laid out, cold as a wedge, and the other fellow has skip-ped, so I guess the innocent amusement is all over, anyhow."

The explanation was a surprise, and at first was hardly believed by the larger part of the audience; but it was a fact. Though no one had seen them going the duke and his champion were no longer on the spot where the gang had last seen them, and no one could say how or when they disappeared.

If it had been left entirely to the duke he would probably have been there yet—living or dead—but the old gentleman, reckless as he had seemed in striking into such a fray, was a good counselor, and by no means bloodthirsty. He had killed no one so far, and he saw that it was a good time to get out of the road.

"Come," he whispered, as he stepped softly to the side of the young man. "It is time that we were taking care of ourselves, and now is our chance. Buckle will keep them busy for a few minutes, and if we stay he will only have to club us, too. Follow me. I know the ins and outs of the place."

Though he uttered no answer, the shrug of the shoulders, and the gentle push of the young man was enough to show that the advice was distasteful to him.

"Don't be a fool. You are not bound to fight a whole roomful of howling idiots, who are bent on assassinating you, without giving you a chance. Follow, and I'll explain things afterward."

Keeping his hands on the arm of the young man, he turned quietly away, leaving Buckle to continue his argument, which was attracting the attention of everybody who had not been scared out by the shooting. It was a step or two to the nearest window, and they were out of it and pursuing their way toward the hotel, some little time before the inquiries as to their whereabouts were being made.

"Don't think that it was any disgrace for you to drop out of that crowd the best way you could find. The biggest fool is the man that throws away his life; and that is what you would be doing with yours if you stayed there another five minutes. Buckle's intentions are good enough, and he never stops at anything when it is a question of carrying them out; but with that crowd against him he could not have saved you. Some one would have got in a snap-shot, and the more you downed, the worse it would have been for you."

"Aw, weally?" gasped the duke.

"Yes. They were after you in earnest. The question I would like to hear answered is, what is it for? They must have strong reasons to make them take the course they did. Do you know anything particular about the man they call Jim Flemming? He attacked you very strangely, and the gang appeared to be working in his interest."

"'Pon bonnaw, naw."

"And how is it about the young lady that performs at the Odeon? Something was said about her. What have you to do with Myrtle Mead? Or has she any cause to hate you?"

"Weally 'pon bonnaw!"

"Strange that Myrtle Mead or her friends should care to have you removed. So far as I can understand you befriended her at the risk of your life."

The duke was struggling with an idea. He had no difficulty in expressing to to himself; but to tell it to another person was quite a different thing. Finally he gurgled out in a hippity-hop sort of style.

"But this, aw, is not Miss Mead, don'tchaw know. It's some one else in her clothes."

"And you told some one that, did you?"

"I'm afraid they heard me say it."

"Then, that's the milk in the cocoanut. You know too much, for the present. I won't tell you to leave the camp, as you don't seem to be of the running-away kind; but I'll give you a solemn bit of advice. Get to your room as soon as you can; and stay there till daylight. Hard Luck is an unhealthy town for you to swagger around in after sundown. Now, as man to man, who came here in your company? You helped save my life yesterday, and I was willing to run some risk to be of service to you this evening. If you have a hand why not show it to me? You can be sure that I am trustworthy so far as you are concerned."

"Aftah the weal Miss Mead, perhaps, don'tchaw know. I—aw—cawn't talk. When he comes back I'll send him aound."

Bromwell looked at him sharply. They were

just at the porch of the hotel, and by the light of the big lamp above the door a pretty fair view of his face could be obtained; and there was an honest look about it that seemed to convince the old gentleman.

"About one man in a hundred would believe you, and I am the one in the first century. I know something of the breed. It is not worth while to question you. My guesses at what you came here for would be more satisfactory than your best explanation. Good-night, and take care of yourself. You're a good little man, even if you can't talk."

"If he can't talk, mebbe he kin fight," grated a harsh voice behind them, taking up the thread of the conversation where Bromwell was dropping it. "Anyhow, down goes his buildin'—an' yourn fur company."

Half a dozen dark figures had slipped behind them from the shadow of the hotel; and as their leader spoke, the restsprung at the unsuspecting two.

CHAPTER XX.

KING KENNEDY ASKS QUESTIONS.

THE attack was a surprise, even if it did not find either man altogether off his guard. Although jest and threat were not given until the assailants appeared to be actually at work, they were a warning that perhaps saved Howard Bromwell. He gave a quick glance over his shoulder, and then a tremendous side spring that carried him out of immediate danger. If the duke had been as fortunate the way would have been open for their retreat into the house.

But the young man who called himself McGinnis was not as quick to take the alarm, and he adopted different tactics, though perhaps the only one to save his head from the club that went swooping over it. He simply threw his feet straight out and sat down—hard.

"Trying to butt your brains out, are you?" growled the man, no trace of merriment in his tone. "On him, boys, in a huddle! I'll look after the old cove."

The order was literally obeyed, and without a second's hesitation. A man on the ground is not always a good mark for a club, especially at night; and if the shooting began it would bring spectators that were not at all desirable. Before the duke could understand what was going on, he was crushed under the weight of four or five men who fell upon him bodily, grappling as they came.

Where each man got a hold he kept it, and in the least possible time there was a gag in the mouth of the unfortunate young man, his wrists were fastened behind his back, and he was hustled away so rapidly that if there had been a cold-blooded spectator he would have been puzzled to account for the mysterious disappearance. The men came and went like phantoms, and their prisoner made neither outcry nor resistance.

As for their leader, he followed so quickly that it did not take him long to join them. He had looked after Bromwell in a way to take the conceit out of the old gentleman for some time to come. As the latter sprung upon the porch, the other gave a quick swing or two of his hand, and then a cast that sent a cord winding and winding around the body of Bromwell. When the coil was finished a ball of lead struck him on the side of the head, and he sunk to the floor, senseless.

He lay there for a little while, undiscovered. Then he came back gradually to consciousness, staggered to his feet, and looked around him in a bewildered sort of way; finally moving slowly away without giving any alarm.

As the duke had been choked into a state of semi-insensibility, he walked along altogether in an automatic way. When he did not move he was dragged, and not very gently.

When he first tried to recall what had happened, familiar landmarks had disappeared, and he neither knew where he was, nor in what direction he was going. He was no longer in Hard Luck, and the course he was pursuing led over rising and stony ground. It put him somewhat in mind of the route by which he and Phelim had entered the town.

At last a halt was made in a little copse of trees.

"This place will do as well as any for a preliminary examination," said the leader of the party.

"It won't take long to find out whether we have a white elephant on our hands. I reckon that the young man won't need much urging to talk when it's die, dog, or eat the hatchet. Now then, sonny, you want to find that tongue of yours, and find it mighty quick. Who are you; what do you want in Hard Luck; and what do you know about Miss Myrtle Mead, the young lady who does the high wire and the trapeze at the Odeon?"

The duke gasped after his usual style, and then said nothing. Not even the revolver that was held to his head as the man began his special address to him, could make his tongue work a mite freer than usual.

"I begin ter believe the kid's genuine," muttered one of the men as he turned away.

"Ef he's only a blasted fool it's a heap pity that we put ourselves in a box where he will

have to croak, or we go under. This killin' men in cold blood are more than I got a good stomach for, and I wish he or I were somewhere else. He's goin' ter ha'nt me."

The words came distinctly to the ears of the prisoner, and one would have thought that such a warning would have had some effect on him; but it rattled over his head as unnoticed as a spring shower on a duck's back. If he was frightened, he gave no sign, and stared at the shadowy revolver as though he did not know that the thing was a weapon that might hurt if it went off.

"What is your name?" asked the leader, sternly. A sound that was suspiciously much like a laugh, from one of the men, did not make his temper any the better.

"Patrick McGinnis," answered the duke, promptly.

"So you can talk if you want to; and lie like all creation with the same breath. Do you suppose that any one is 'going to believe a yarn like that? You are no more an Irishman than I am; and it's only asking to have your throat cut, and throwing in a chromo for the doing of it, to set up such nonsense. If you are as big a fool as you look you are not our man at all. And if we had just known, for instance, that you were a sport that was trying to make a strike out of Hard Luck, playing off innocent, we wouldn't have thought it worth while to bother with you. But if you are a detective, come to do business here—and you can bet high that we will find it all out before we get done with you—then, you had better have stayed away, and saved work for the undertaker. Now, we have given you time enough to figure it all up, and see how the land lays. You explain what you are doing here, and what you expect to make, putting on such style as you have been slinging around here, and we may be good to you. But if you are after us you may as well spit it out at first as at last, for the thing is bound to come—and then you can guess what we will have to do. Self-preservation is the first law of nature. What have you got to say about it?"

"'Pon honnaw, disgusting, don'chaw know."

There was not a particle of variation in the tone in which the stock phrase was uttered. Neither coaxing nor threats could have any effect on the incorrigible young man.

"And you refuse to explain the nature of your business here?"

"I, aw, cawn't talk; ask Phelim. He, aw, does all the talking. It is what, aw, he is paid foah."

"Unfortunately, Phelim is not here, and we have no time to hunt him up. If you could explain just where he is, and what he is doing, we might in time let you off. In fact, if we are not mistaken, it would suit our hand a great deal better than particulars about yourself. Only the truth, man, and if we find that you are not going to be in our way we will turn you loose. It is self-protection that we mean, and nothing else."

"Aw, weally."

It was more than exasperating; cool as he had kept himself all along it was no wonder that now the man was flaming with wrath.

"That settles it. The next time you are asked to talk you will be glad enough, if you have a tongue to talk with. No use to fool away time here. Take him along to the camp, where we can go the entire figure. Have a good, hot fire, and everything else ready. By the heavens! He will either talk or roast."

The man turned hastily away as he finished speaking and took a few steps in the direction whence they had come. Then he called back over his shoulder:

"I may be detained for an hour or so. Let no one monkey with him till I get there; but have things ready. We can't waste time with him. He must be finished before morning. We should be ten miles from here by daybreak."

Without answer the man proceeded to carry out the orders; so far, at least, as immediate departure was concerned.

As there did not seem a ghost of a chance for resistance or escape, the prisoner went along without objection; while the leader was returning to Hard Luck, on a mission that was at once dangerous and important.

Straight back to the town he went, retracing his steps almost exactly until he found himself passing the cabin near to the hotel. He looked up at it curiously, but saw no one at the window; nor could he hear any sounds within that might lead him to suppose that either of its inmates was stirring. He walked on a few yards, then wheeled and sauntered back, whistling softly to himself as he passed.

The whistle was a signal, and if any one had been watching, they might have seen how it was answered. Once more the man turned; and then a female figure glided out of the door and up to his side. As it was not Miss Hazard, it would have been fair to suppose that it was Miss Myrtle who was giving this after-midnight interview.

"So you came to find me. It is imprudent, yet I suppose it was necessary," she whispered, as she took the arm of the man and hastily drew him along until they were in the shade of the house, and so near that they could slip behind it

in case any one came along to notice their interview.

"Yes. I looked for you when the show was out, but somehow I missed you. I thought that you would be able to slip out, as you had promised, and waited around here as long as I could. Not even a line, tossed out of the window. Then I had to go. I had almost given up being able to see you to-night. How has everything gone? Has the old lady got through gushing over her lost sheep, that found its way back to the fold?"

"I must plead for mercy, I suppose. She held on to me from the time we left the house until we got back again; and when I was looking for a chance to come out to you, I fell asleep. That is the long and short of it. I suppose I was more tired than I imagined. Anyhow, I only woke up a few moments ago. I found the griffin sleeping soundly, and while I was dreamily wondering what time it was I heard your whistle. I slipped out, of course, but I don't know how long she will continue to slumber, and it is too soon to take many chances. What do you want me to say, or what special thing do you want to say to me?"

"She suspects nothing?"

"Nothing."

"It was a chance worth the playing for in spite of the risk. I can hardly believe you, even yet. She is no child; and blind as she is it takes some one that is perfect in the part to fool her. You had so little opportunity to study your role from the only model that I was afraid for you. Of course, there would not be so much trouble in drawing the wool over the eyes of the good people of the town, for in such a case they are ready to believe what they see."

"In other words, you did not give me credit for being the finished actor that I am. Did you ever know me to bungle anything that I undertook? I, sir, am now Myrtle Mead, very much at your service. The next thing in order is for the minister plenipotentiary or the ambassador extraordinary to make his appearance, demanding the hand of the infant in marriage. I am doing my part; you do yours as well and there will be a pair or two of very long arms deep in the Ainslie millions before many months roll around."

"To say nothing of the incumbrance that you will have to accept along with them."

"Correct that to 'may have to accept.' I am not so sure that the scion of a line that has, as you say, been allied even with royalty, will care to lay his heart and hand, to say nothing of his title, at the feet of a young lady that he finds swinging on a tight rope for the amusement of such audiences as gather at the Odeon. Very charming feet they are, no doubt; but when it is business, pure and simple, those blue-blooded aristocrats sometimes are as squeamish as—the deuce."

"Not when it comes to a question of ruin, perhaps. But that is nothing either here or there. Either way the millions are in sight, and you gather them in."

"Less, of course, a very liberal commission to the gentleman who will be my prime minister while the fun lasts."

"That goes without saying. Deep as is my love for you, I can see no reason why I should not accept a share in the good fortune that is to come to you. If I was sure that there was no one else trying to take a hand in to checkmate our game, I would run the risk of all Hard Luck finding it out. But it hardly seems possible that there will not be a secret inquiry made in advance; and if so, the man, or men, that will have it in charge will be no fools. They don't send such to work up a case in a camp like Hard Luck."

"You attend to the detectives, and I will manage the son and heir when he comes. You will know what to do with them, and you had better not hesitate long in doing it."

"Thanks for the advice, which you do not really suppose is needed. I have hold of either the duke or the detective now. Unless I can find out which it is the matter is really a little complicated. At present I lean toward the opinion that it is the duke; but a father of a prophet could hardly tell."

The girl gave a little cry of astonishment.

"Oh, you can expect the unexpected to happen. The whole thing is so improbable, and—"

He ceased speaking, and with a sudden bound sprung squarely on the back of a man that was lurking near.

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE REVELATION.

THE men that had the duke in charge acted as though they had little fear of his making his escape, or even attempting it. Of course they had taken such precautions that it did not seem possible that he could get away; but after that their vigilance in a great measure ceased. They had him so fairly surrounded that all avenues of escape were not only closed but sealed.

There is such a thing as being too certain, and that they never thought of. If he had been quiet and unmoved from the moment that he fell into their hands, that was just so much the more reason to suppose that when the time came they would find him very wide awake.

In silence they plodded along for perhaps half a mile. No one cared to talk to him, or before him. They gave no hint whither, or how far they were going, or what were their intentions. Everything was all right one minute, and the next the cyclone had broken.

With his hands tied behind his back it would have been folly to have attempted to get away; but when the knot at his wrists loosened of its own accord, there was a change in affairs that was as sudden as it was wonderful.

The young man might not be able to talk; but there could be no question, after what then happened, about his being able to hit from the shoulder. With a rapid fling he sent out his right fist against the head of the nearest man on the right.

The fellow dropped, without knowing what had hurt him.

Then McGinnis struck left and right, without getting quite so much weight into the blows. They only sent two men staggering away from him, leaving an avenue open on that side.

Without loss of time the young man darted away, fairly leaping over the prostrate body of the first man that he had struck.

He had been guided altogether by chance; but the chance was in his favor. Before he had run a hundred yards he found himself on a trail that led down the mountain-side. He only guessed that it was the way to Hard Luck, but the guess was a good one. Once fairly started, and though he did not know one point of the compass from another, in that unfamiliar spot, yet he could not have lost his way if he had tried.

Of course he expected to be made the target of several revolvers; and he was surprised not to hear the shots that he had determined to risk. He did not know of certain private instructions that had been given before his capture, or he might not have thought the risk so great. With a few yards' start he did not believe that any man there could catch him in a fair foot-race.

They tried it hard enough, but the duke had the heels of the wind; and the most wonderful luck about keeping on his feet. Any one else would have stumbled half a dozen times—probably come to grief in the first hundred yards. Instead of that he ran on smoothly and steadily, without stumble or slackening of his speed. Though every effort was made, his lead increased, and before the fellows were willing to admit that the chase was hopeless he had vanished from their sight.

Somehow it is always natural to suppose that a man who is slow in his speech is in most things made after the same fashion. The pursuit kept up for some time at a rate the men thought must overhaul the fugitive. When, after what appeared to them a long time, there were no signs of him, it was believed that he had taken to cover, and was trying to hide in the clumps of trees and bushes that were convenient to the trail.

With this idea in their heads they would have been more than mortal if they had not acted on it. By abandoning the useless chase they would have saved plenty of labor. Into the covert they dashed, while the runaway, with the grace and ease of a man thoroughly broken to the work, kept on, scarcely once slackening the speed at which he originally started. If they had followed ever so hard they would have only caught him, if at all, by accident.

Their action made the escape a certainty. By the time they had given up the fruitless search, and unwillingly admitted that their intended victim had made good his escape, he was already entering Hard Luck.

Of course the latter part of the return was made at a slackened speed, but the young man was even yet going at a rapid rate, and showing no signs of failing powers.

Once back to the town and the escaped prisoner steered his course toward the hotel. Chance brought him to the cabin of Miss Hazzard first, and as he was treading lightly he came upon the pair, and heard some words of their conversation, before being discovered.

The reference to the duke and the detective gave him good grounds for suspecting that this was the very man from whose clutches he had escaped, and the tone of his voice told him something more. It was a different one from that employed out on the mountain, and he had never heard it but once before, yet he was certain that King Kennedy, the abductor of the true Myrtle Mead, was in front of him, and by intuition he saw the whole plot as it was. He would have given much to have heard the conversation to its natural end, but in shifting a little nearer he attracted the attention of the sharpest ears that were in all that country, and brought an attack that was as quick and savage as that of a tiger.

Of course the arch plotter never dreamed that this was the man that he had left, as he thought, securely a prisoner. He only knew that it was some one who had approached in a stealthy manner, and had probably even heard more than he cared to have generally known. He intended to down the spy first, and consider what to do with him afterward. After having got away with the acknowledged king-pin of the camp, he did not expect to have much trouble

with a fellow that was hanging around as a street loungee at this time of night. He was certain that he had not been followed there, and that this was only some casual passer, who saw two persons together, and had a curiosity to know who they were and what they were doing.

The latter part was all right, after a fashion; but there was something wrong about his calculations, or he had met with a phenomenon. Taken at a disadvantage as the lurker was, he was equal to the emergency. There was a flurry, a grunt, a turning and a twisting. The under man suddenly let himself down, and caught Kennedy by the ankles, whirling himself around so that the back of the latter struck against the corner of the cabin as he straightened himself once more.

The arms of the rustler relaxed, and on the instant the duke shook him off and sprang away, far enough to take a quick glance toward the spot where the female had been standing.

She was no longer there. At the first movement of Kennedy she had taken the alarm, and darted into the house. She reasoned that it would be safer to come out again after the man was safely secured than to chance being seen by any one who might be attracted in case the struggle should turn out to be not altogether noiseless. But never a moment did she suppose that the tables could be so completely turned.

The sound of running feet a little later told her that something had gone wrong, but as there was no signal she did not venture out again, nor did she hear again that night from King Kennedy.

Five minutes later the duke was ensconced safely in his bed at Barney Blake's, thinking over the incidents of the evening as well as he was able, while Kennedy was making his way back to his camp in no very good humor.

"The villain must have run like a deer," he muttered to himself, as he turned away from the town. "He did not have a chance to hear anything of importance, and it is not likely that he thought he recognized Nola. It is better not to run any further risks to-night. I found out about all I cared to know, and gave her a hint that she must keep her eyes open for detectives. She is as sharp as a steel-trap, and can patch up the rest of the story that I would have told her. If that fellow was any one to have been afraid of, he would not have risked himself so near. Reckon it was some one on his way home from one of the dens. But the next time I don't bet that I am not reaching for an eel. If I had hit for keeps, I would have been a great deal more comfortable now. Strange, too, that no one knows anything of Kemp. The boys say that he never followed the trail out of town, and no one here has seen him since last night. There is another weak spot. The girl gave him a set-back that would have satisfied any reasonable man, but he was still holding on at last accounts. If he gives the boys the slip, and comes bursting in on the privacy of Miss Hazzard's cottage, I suppose Nola will have to settle him herself—in one way or another. She is able to do it, but I would rather save her that. Pity that I didn't go the whole figure last night, and leave the future to take care of itself. If things keep on complicating, the mess couldn't have been any the worse for it."

Which all went to show that King Kennedy's plot was in danger from several directions that he knew of; and that if he had known how matters were going elsewhere, he might have had further cause for worry.

As for Nola—she waited some little time, to see if the interrupted interview was to be completed; looked anxiously at the face of the sleeping woman, whom she was so vilely trying to deceive; and at last threw herself down on her bed, and slept a sleep as quiet and dreamless as that of the righteous.

CHAPTER XXII.

PHELIM FINDS OUT A FEW FACTS FROM HIS CHARGE.

THE strongest hope that Phelim had, when he executed his plan for the escape of the prisoner of the rustlers, was that they would find their hands too full with the gentlemen across the river to have much time to attend to him. He knew perfectly well that the advantages were against him in case of an early pursuit.

His horse was by no means fresh, he knew nothing of the country except so far as he had ridden over it in the last twenty-four hours; and though he had a pretty good opinion of himself he did not believe very confidently that if it came to a fight he would be able to stand off such a little army of picked men.

There was nothing for him to do but to put as large a distance as possible between himself and the spot before the escape of the prisoner was discovered, at the same time keeping an eye on the lay of the land, and steering in the direction of any spot, or locality, that seemed to offer opportunities for concealment or defense, provided it did not take them too far from the straight line for Hard Luck. He remembered several spots that he had passed, that seemed adapted to either.

The young girl at his elbow was a fearless equestrian. She had accepted the opportunity for escape without a word, and had followed for

a mile without opening her lips. From time to time Phelim would glance back at her, but as yet he had not drawn rein, or asked for any explanation.

When the first burst of speed was over, and there was still no sign of pursuit, he slackened the pace a little, and allowed her to close up the slight distance that had separated them. As she came to his side he heard her voice for the first time since the race began.

"You have done well," she said, quietly. "I recognized you the moment that you made your appearance as one of the two men who made such a gallant fight for me in the rear of the theater, last night, and who followed so bravely afterward. It happened that no one but myself saw the exact way that the man before you fell from his horse when the captain called you up. It made me suspicious—for by that time I had my wits once more all about me—and so I paid particular attention to your voice, and knew that it was one that I had heard before, and guessed that it belonged to you. We must not push on too fast until we see what pursuit is to be made. I am very tired, and if I am driven too hard I may have to give up altogether in the most critical moment. Are you still alone; and what are your plans?"

"Pon me sowl, but it appears to me that gurruls grow 'round here thick as blackberries. Av you wor the young leddy that fell off av the trapeze, sure an' there's three av yez, an' ye are not her at all, at all. Phat have ye to say to that?"

"What is it that you mean? Certainly, after taking all this trouble, risking all this danger, to rescue me you must know that I am the girl you saw abducted from the Odeon. I do not understand your question."

"An' Oi don't understand it any too well meself. It wor one young leddy that Oi saw making her escape an' safe on ther way to Har-rud Luck; but Oi said to meself, said Oi; it's too aisy that she got away, an' it's folly on Oi will, till Oi say phat's to be seen. Thin Oi saw that there wor anither faymale befrint av me, an', sez Oi, that's your mutton, Phelim. But av ye ain't Gladys Golden, the gurrul that Oi saw swingin' in the goolch, at the ind av a rope, to save that owld codger wid the gray hair, thin Oi don't know b'anes. Spake up for yerself. It's all the same to Phelim McGallagin, an' Oi'll stay wid ye till the death, av ye wants me; but a man loikes to know phat he's doin' whin he takes his loife in his hands."

"And perhaps a girl likes to know something about a man, and who he is, before she trusts him with the secrets of her life. If you were only the roaring, raving, fight-loving sort of Irishman that you are trying to represent, it is possible that I would as soon trust myself to the keeping of the men from whom I have so lately run away. Truth for truth. Tell me what it is that you are after and who you really are, and I will explain, so far as I myself understand it, the mystery of which you have got a glimpse."

Phelim balted his horse and looked straight into the eyes of the girl, who had also drawn rein. Each seemed to have made a discovery, though neither could say exactly what it was. It seemed that if there were any confidences possible the hour for making them had not yet arrived, while the stare told them nothing.

"Sure, it's Phelim McGallagin that Oi am, an' it's to foll'y the duke that Oi came to this warrum climate. Av that's a bangin' matter it's a bad way Oi'll be in. Av he has anything in the moinde av him that's just as it oughtn't to be, it's Phelim that knows nothing about it, at all, at all."

"I will be a little more communicative," then. I am one of three girls, that once appeared together on the stage. At that time, and with care in our make-up, it was hard to tell which was which. In theatrical or show parlance, we worked together, and were called the wonderful triplets. The alliance only lasted for one season, and then we parted, never expecting to see each other again. Yet, of all unlikely places to meet, we all came together, or in shouting distance, at Hard Luck. One of us has a chance for a fortune—do you know anything about it?"

"Three av ye, does ye say?"

The mind of Phelim was evidently more on her story than her question, since he ignored the latter altogether.

"Yes, three. Gladys Golden, Myrtle Mead, and Nola Norman. One of them will have the chance to accept or refuse the wealth that has been gathering in the coffers of a duke; and perhaps to live under a roof that before now has sheltered the daughters of kings. Strange, is it not, that such a fortune may be in store for a woman who has worn the tights and fleshings of the ring, and thrown kisses to the rabble at Hard Luck? No wonder that there should be plots and counterplots, and perhaps bloodshed before it is all settled and done. What do you know about it?"

Again the question. She returned to it as obstinately as King Kennedy when seeking to know the business of "the duke."

"Bliss yer purthy pictures, it's just nothin' at all, but av Oi ain't mishtaken it's hot ye wor getting on the track. It's Patrick McGinnis

that ye wor affther m'anin', and it's a dollar to a dime that I'm bettin' on that same thing. Whin we get out av this it's all Oi know about him that Oi'll be tellin' ye; an' mighty little is that sure. Av it's ristid ye are, we had better be movin'. A long, rough ride it is to Harrud Luck."

He told just enough to excite the curiosity of the girl; if indeed she asked her questions with any hope of information in the answer.

As the explanation so far given, of the mystery spoken of by Phelim, was of the vaguest, the matter could not well be pressed; and the advice was too good to be slighted. They took a lingering look toward the rear, failing to see any sign of pursuit, and then again urged their mustangs forward.

In the excitement of the rescue Phelim had entirely forgotten Bowlding. There was something strange about his disappearance; and now that the hurry was a little over the matter began to trouble him. He asked the girl whether she had seen anything of the man; but she had not, and was certain that he had not come into collision with Lieutenant Murray and his men.

"An av he wor one ov the gang it's loike ez not he would have been layin' thim onto me whin they found the toime. Av he wor a square mon he must paddle his own canoe ontill we m'ate. Thim he can have all the satisfaction that Phelim McGallagin knows how to give him. It's the leddy's first, av it takes a wheel."

With this consoling reflection he dropped the man out of his mind altogether, and turned his attention to the task that was before him. To act as a guide and a defense was rather a strain on his instincts. As far as knowledge went, the young lady was better fitted than he to undertake the task.

There was one consolation. It was the hour of sunset now, and if the good fortune that had so far befriended him would only last a little longer, he had but little fear of being overtaken before morning.

"Av Oi could only say phat's goin' on back there Oi would know a h'ape better phat the chances are of thim rustlers overhauling us. Sure, an' it's moighty disapp'atin' it is to be lookin' back an' niver seein' anythin' at all."

He made the statement in what seemed to be good earnest, and looked quite puzzled when he considered over the answer to it. He understood his thoughts better than his words, and if the two did not agree, he was pretty certain that the former were all right.

"It's a blessing that you cannot have a thing for wishin'. There are as sharp eyes back there as you can boast of, and if it was not for that friendly roll in the ground they would have been on us long ago. Let well enough alone. I feel rested now, but I cannot go on all night. It is lucky that it will soon be so dark that they can only follow us by chance."

"Sure, an' Oi only meant to see widout bein' seen—an' it looks as though Oi had the chance. Phat is that risin' the divide now?"

As he spoke, he pointed to a string of horsemen that had just come into view, far in their rear.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FLIGHT IN THE NIGHT.

THE SUN was already below the horizon, and only in the west lingered the last flush of day. The chances were that those in the rear could not see the fugitives, but whether they were following the trail, or had made their appearance there by chance, were questions to which it was not easy to give the answer. The men were certainly coming on at a rate that showed they were in earnest, and if they could or did keep up that gait, it was only a question of time when they would overhaul the pair.

The girl looked around. To leave the line they were following might be dangerous. So long as they kept to it, their faces were toward Hard Luck, and the way had few difficulties. Once off of it and there was no telling what they might encounter. There were gashes and gulches in these regions; there was broken land, and now and then a *barranca*. In the darkness they might turn aside only to death. And even on this route there were points enough which it was not well to pass at racing speed. Was it best to push on, or should they seek cover the moment that the night fairly settled down? Both riders and horses felt the jaunt of the day too much to stand a journey through the night. Their present rate of speed could only last a little longer, at the best.

"Mebbe it's not thim at all," suggested Phelim.

"Harrud Luck wouldn't go back on ye ontirely, an' it may be some av the b'yes, phat is after ye hot an' heavy. Leastways, after the young leddy av the Odeon. It's a pity Oi don't know the wan crowd from the other. Oi might make a mishtake widout ind av they closed up, an' av Oi shot like Oi ginerally do the camp might only be yearnin' to hang us both."

"Little danger of its being any one but the rustlers. I have escaped out of their hands once, and I don't care to get near enough to them again to count their faces. Better to hurry on while the light lasts, and then seek

concealment till the moon rises. If they pass we will have to find another trail."

The pace was not relaxed as the conversation went on, and as the twilight was going fast the figures were growing more indistinct every moment. The chances of escape seemed to be growing stronger.

As the two happened to look back over their shoulders at the same moment, they were nearly unseated by a sudden start that their horses gave. Indeed, the young lady only saved herself from a fall by a hasty snatch at the mane of the frightened animal.

Phelim was in better shape to withstand the force of the movement. He was a rough rider that it was hard to dispose of, and without a second for thought his knees mechanically closed, and he drew the steed together at the instant that it was about to bolt. The horses gave him employment for the moment, so that the cause of the fright was not seen until its nature was known. A man had appeared suddenly, just in their front; and at the cry of dismay that came from the nearly unseated female his voice was instantly recognized by Phelim as he exclaimed in a reassuring way:

"Hold hard, pard! It's Ben Bowlding, and a friend. I got caught in the jam at the river, an' couldn't git to yer when I see that yer had made ther rifle. It took mighty hard riding to catch up, but it's all right now. If they get a little closer the fun will begin, an' it's likely to be all on one side. We have the bulge now, an' no mistake."

"It's Bowldin' sure enough. An' av ye couldn't come aisy, mebbe ye had better not come at all. Phat wor ye doin', la'vin' me coop-ed up there, to be slaughtered whin they found me. Be the powers, it looked as though ye wanted me to be in trouble, an' me innocent as a babe all the toime. Phere w'd we all have been av Oi had stayed as ye lift me? For tin cints Oi'd settle wid ye right now, for desertin' av me whin Oi n'aded ye most."

Phelim spoke as though he meant it. He was in no very good humor, anyhow; and, in addition, he wanted to give his companion warning. He had already helped her to regain her seat in the saddle, and she was once more at her ease.

"Don't worry about me, Irish," retorted Bowlding.

"You had a chance ter do a big thing, an' you did it. Ef I hed come back fur you when I spotted the Men of the Moon, they would have yanked me up on the road, and corraled the hull outfit. Ef you think you know this country better than I do, and want to drop me out, say the word. I won't care to run in double harness with a man that thinks I have throwed off on him. But ez it may be life or death to this young lady, I guess she had better take her choice which she is going with when you an' me parts."

"Don't be too pravius. It's for the sake of the leddy that Oi'm willin' to forgit the way ye tr'ated me, an' troost ye till we git out ov the drag. We've had an illegant rist; row it's toime to be doin' somethin'."

"You'll have plenty to do before mornin' if you stay with me," was the answer of Bowlding.

"The trouble has only begun; but I can carry you through if you are half as good to work as you are to talk. An' the first thing is to get out of this trap. If you had kept on a mile you would have hit a snag. That is the way our trail ought to run."

He pointed away, nearly at right angles to the course they had been pursuing. Doubtless it was the way that he had taken to head them off.

It was dark now, and when they had ridden a few minutes in the new direction, there was but little danger of their being discovered. Yet chance might be against them; and if the pursuit was as keen as they had reason to expect, there was a possibility of other parties heading them off or closing in. The Men of the Moon had the reputation of being hard to shake off and wise on the trail.

Still, into the little dingle to which he led them, it was not likely that others would look or come, and Bowlding's halt came at an acceptable time for the girl, who was beginning to show signs of a weariness that was but natural.

"I've been a-watchin' you," said Ben, for the first time addressing her; "and you can't afford to go a foot further. In four hours ther moon will be up, an' by that time mebbe you kin wagon on; but if we try it now thar will be a little woman ov about your size clean played out. It ain't just a picnic that's afore you, an' unless you save up a little we won't git into Hard Luck till it's too late for business, and the fun's all over. Take my advice and don't try to crowd too hard now. When the moon rises we can make the time up, and it will go twice as easy."

He rolled off of his horse as he spoke, and began to tether it out, as though he only gave the advice for what it was worth, and left it to the others to go or stay, just as it suited them. He did not know the course had already been suggested.

"An' whin we start ag'in which way will we be afther goin'? It may be in a burry that we will slide out, an' it's as well to know before-hand."

"You can have it to suit yerselves. Quite likely you think ter strike straight fur Hard Luck. That lies out yonder, and a hard day's ride it is. If I was leadin' on my own judgment I'd not start that way at all, but just break for the other side of the river. The men you would find there would stand between you and the rustlers. It's a day further 'round, but it's safer, two to one."

The proposition was an unexpected one, but it had a point or two in its favor that made it worth the considering. It was the girl that answered:

"Unless we have come too far to retrace our steps we might try it if the way appeared open. There is time enough to decide, and at present I care more for rest than even for escape. I am only a girl, and few would have stood the journey as well. I am not ashamed to own that I am tired—so tired I could not ride another mile. And then, it seems to me that we got away too easy. It troubles me. There may be danger in front of us. The whole affair is so strange that almost anything can be believed in connection with it."

She slid wearily to the ground. In a few moments everything was arranged for the halt, and she was enjoying the rest that she so much needed.

Bowlding appeared to possess one of those tireless frames that can go on forever. While the others reclined in silence and soon in slumber, he was keeping his eyes open and his ears on the alert. An Indian scout could not have crawled near to the camp, unperceived.

Hour after hour passed. Two slept and one watched. From time to time Bowlding came softly near, glanced at the sleepers, and then went away on his rounds. He was glad to see that the girl was making the most of her opportunity, but he looked at the Irishman with a smile that was not altogether complimentary. Such confidence in an unknown man was more than he would have shown. And there was a selfishness about it that was superb.

When the time for the moon to rise was at hand, Ben took a wider tour than ever, and gaining a point whence he could obtain something of a view, took a long, searching look at the plain. With eyes accustomed to the work he could have seen anything that looked like a moving object at quite a distance.

The way seemed open and the time to move at hand. He went back to the camp and called softly as he came. There was no answer, and when he had stepped to the spot where he had lately left the sleepers they were both gone.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LADY IN SEARCH OF HER HUSBAND.

WHEN the stage came in the day following the reappearance at the Odeon it brought a passenger that attracted considerable attention when she dismounted in front of Barney Blake's hotel.

It was a lady, and one dressed in a style that was enough of itself to commend her to the good graces of all Hard Luck.

Then there was a certain bold beauty about her face, that was sufficient to attract, even while the air of the owner said as plainly as possible, keep at a distance. What was she after in Hard Luck? There was certainly some very sufficient reason to cause her to brave the toils and dangers of the journey to such a camp.

There was the usual group of loungers around, to see the stage disgorge its load, and some one started the suggestion that she had come thither in pursuit of a runaway husband. The idea caught on so quickly, and firmly, that before long it appeared to be the truth itself; and by the system of grape-vine telegraphy so common to such towns, it spread all over the camp. It was a delightful bit of mystery, because it gave the sports a chance to lay odds as to who the fortunate—or unfortunate—man might be who had a title to such a stylish piece of dry goods.

The prominent citizens who were credited with being the man included the whole list, for there were none of them that might not be considered as open to suspicion; and if they heard of the things whispered about them they probably were all more or less capable of feeling the compliment after seeing the lady. The fact was that she was a stranger to all of them.

The lady gave no signs of what were her intentions, but simply signified she would stop for a few days at the hotel. Barney lingered to give her a chance. He had often divined the intentions of his guests by the questions that they asked, however guardedly they might frame them.

This lady asked none, however; gave her name in for registry as Mrs. Arlington Auburn; and settled herself as though she had always lived there.

She took her seat at the supper-table, without any hesitation, looking calmly at the guests who came rushing in, and going through the bill of fare without any squeamishness, much to the relief of Barney Blake. He had expected

that she would demand a separate table, and all the delicacies of the season. He had entertained such looking guests before, and was rather afraid of them. She acted as if perfectly unconscious of the admiring glances that were cast in her direction, and when she had made a satisfactory meal withdrew.

There was one guest who for an instant was discomposed at seeing her, yet fortunately there was no one looking at him as he stood in the doorway, a moment or so after the last of the others had been seated.

He shrunk a little as he saw the lady at the other end of the table, and his lips fashioned the legend:

"Disgusting, aw, weally doan'chaw know!"

Then the duke advanced as unconcerned as usual, and took his seat about three places below her, in the only vacant chair.

When Mrs. Auburn had gone to her room, however, there was a pleased look on her face. She had found the object of her search without any questions being asked, or anything done to show that she and the duke were at all interested in each other. That left the game open for whatever sort of play it might turn out to her interest to make.

"The little fool will be around to see before dark, unless he makes up his mind to bolt. I'll run the risk of that though. It is as like as not that he is still on the square, but has struck a lead of some kind. Now that I have found him I will not fly off the handle until I know that there is a reason for it. He may be next door to an idiot, but somehow he has the knack of finding where the coin grows, and is as brave as a lion. Yes, there are worse fellows in the world, and if he does not adore me it is my own fault."

Most women would at least have had curiosity enough to make some effort to know under what name the gent was registered, and what he was doing in Hard Luck.

She could have found out without any suspicion attaching to her. His manner and appearance actually compelled questions from any one who saw him for the first time.

But that was not the way that Mrs. Auburn did business. She never hurried matters when, if left to themselves, the explanation would come without it.

Her judgment was verified in a short time.

There came a little tap, which was answered by swinging the door open, and disclosing the figure of McGinnis.

A hesitating look came to her face, a smile of semi-recognition, as she bowed gracefully, but motioned to him to enter.

The invitation was gracefully accepted. Without hesitation the young man entered the room, closing the door behind him.

"Your face really seems familiar," said the cool lady, looking him over. "I suppose that you have some reason for this visit, and that I ought to be able to recall your name, though at present it has escaped my memory. The mention of it will no doubt be sufficient to explain who you are."

"McGinnis, aw—Patrick McGinnis."

He looked her unblinkingly in the face as he made the statement, nor did he appear at all disconcerted at the smile with which it was received.

"And what did you mean by deserting Mrs. McGinnis without leave or warning? And what ridiculous thing has brought you here, to Hard Luck? Do you know that for the first hundred miles she followed you, breathing fire and slaughter? You ought to be ashamed of yourself; and if you have not a perfect excuse I am not certain that she will be a very safe person for you to meet, even now. Can you say anything for yourself, in mitigation of the sentence of the court?"

The tone of the lady was light and airy, yet behind the jest there was an earnestness that told its own story. She watched him coldly enough, and yet there was something of the tiger there, too.

"Weally, aw, disgusting, doan'chaw know," was the feeble answer, as he bowed meekly.

The expression was appropriate; and there was nothing left out. The case was in the lady's hands.

"I might have known it. In dealing with you one wants to say one thing at a time, and say it slow. Will you please explain what brought you here? A few words will do it, and I can then give you an idea whether you are to receive pardon, or something else."

"I came, aw, as pwivate secretary to the—aw, to Mr. McGallagin. He is, aw, the duke in disguise. It was pwofitable, and I accepted."

"You must believe in him, or you wouldn't tell that sort of a yarn to me. But I don't see what a duke is doing out here, and I don't see what he would want of you. Continue the explanation."

But that was what the young man was not inclined to do. He shook his head and intimated that he had nothing to say.

"Come, Arlington, you know that you can trust me in a matter of business. And I know you well enough to be certain that you would not have gone so far out of your way for anything but an important case and large pay.

Tell me all about it, and perhaps I can help you more than you think. Don't hurry yourself, or try to explain too much, and you will get along well enough."

At that the young man, in a quiet sort of way, began.

The story that he told was interesting enough, even in the condensed and fragmentary shape that he gave it. He knew well enough that this keen-eyed lady would understand the merest outline, and all that he desired was to be certain that she would believe it.

They were there in search of a young lady, whose true name was Richmond. Years before her father had separated from her mother, being impelled thereto by certain fears of what the law might be holding over him. He had no intention of deserting her, but as he imagined that if she was with him it would be an easier matter to trail him down, he furnished her with means for her support until his return, and then went his way. In course of time he ceased to hear from his wife, and when it was safe went to look for her. He found that she had disappeared long before, and that circumstances indicated that she had left under the protection of a gentleman that at one time had been her admirer.

There was no question as to his right to an immense fortune, but on account of those same legal complications it was not safe for him to claim it in person. As his only child was a daughter, he could not pass the wealth to her under the law; and as his brother was in possession of the family estates under the assumption of his death, it did not seem fair to ask him to give up the title to the family fortune and yet uphold the family name, though he was willing enough to do anything for the brother that he really loved. The two met in this country, and arranged it during the time that the elder was in hiding, and in correspondence with his wife. During the life of the elder brother he was to receive a certain sum that was adequate to his support. At the death of the younger brother his son was to receive the title, and the personal property if he married the young lady, who otherwise was to be heir to every dollar that was not covered by the entail.

So carefully had the younger brother carried out the spirit of the agreement, so large had been the meane profits, that the young lady would undoubtedly come in for the lion's share of the wealth of the family if the son was as honest as his father, and yet refused to make her his wife.

But meantime the brothers had died and the heiress and her mother had disappeared, leaving but little trace of which way they went. The mission of the two young men at Hard Luck was to investigate a clew that had pointed thitherward. It seemed likely that the mother had never known of the arrangement, but that some one else did. His investigations had told him that, and that this other party intended to obtain the fortune by foul play. The real heiress, he had reason to believe, was a Miss Myrtle Mead, who had been performing on the stage of a variety theater in that town, whence she had been abducted by a man whom he believed to be the true villain of the whole story.

"Myrtle Mead!" exclaimed Mrs. Auburn. "Why, I know something about this. Where is the 'duke'?"

"I, aw, am supposed to be the duke. He said I looked like his fathaw and turned the title ovah to me."

"But where is he now? I must see him at once."

"Cawn't pprove it by me. He is on the twail and I am waiting."

"You don't want to wait too long. Myrtle Mead's mother and father are both living and King Kennedy is somewhere near, to get both gold and revenge. It was a lucky wind—even if it was jealousy—that drove me here. I can help you both, and if you behave yourself I'll do it. Without me there would be no hope."

CHAPTER XXV.

GHOST OR NO GHOST?

THE surprise of the young man was genuine enough. Of course the lady who had been holding this interview with him was his wife. He knew that she had passed through some strange experiences in the course of her life, but never for a moment had he supposed that she could possibly know anything about this which was still a mystery to him.

He almost forgot his drawl as he eagerly asked for further information.

"Oh, it is not worth while to go into any long explanation with you. I want to deal directly with principals. I am older than I look, as you are very well aware, and though a good deal of what you have been telling happened before my time, I knew Myrtle Mead, and the two girls that worked with her when the trio were making a sensation. I also knew the lady who was with her, and who passed as her aunt. And King Kennedy was the villain of the plot, even then. He is the man who might know of the fortune that is at stake, and I doubt not that he is on hand. Is it not so?"

The young man nodded. He was trying to digest the information that he had just received.

He knew all about King Kennedy; but the statement that the father of the trapezist was alive was a revelation. Had he not known the woman who made the assertion so thoroughly, he would have believed that she was mistaken: but when she said a thing, and repeated it with the look in her eyes that was there at present, he knew that it was a statement to gamble on. Probably she could tell something about the woman that had been substituted for Myrtle. Her coming was not a bad thing, after all.

The explanation in regard to the abduction had been somewhat hazy or she would not have had to ask the question. McGinnis had not dwelt on the fact of the reappearance, and the fraud. He went on, after a brief silence, to tell of what he had seen; of his unfortunate exclamation; and the attack that followed it. Incidentally he mentioned the third young lady, who had saved Howard Bromwell when he had fallen over the cliff.

"Ah, I thought so. That accounts for the whole trio. And who is her protector, and what is she doing now? It would have been worth your while to keep an eye in that direction."

"But, aw, she is gone, too."

"That is enough. I suppose while we remain here it may be as well not to appear too intimate. When I have anything to tell you I will let you know. As near as I can make out you have been managing this very well with the light you had. If they don't begin killing too soon there will be a grand finale that will astound the villains, and show virtue, as it ever ought to be, triumphant. That will do. Go now! I am not in as bad a humor with you as I expected to be; but you can see how it would have been if you had really thought to play me false. I can find you—in China. Remember."

Mrs. Auburn dismissed her husband without further ceremony, and he seemed very glad of the opportunity to get out of her presence.

For some little time after the young man had taken his departure, the woman remained seated in deep thought. It seemed so strange that this story should come up now, and in her hearing. It had been so long since she had heard or thought anything about it that she wanted to consider it all. She had not spoken lightly when promising to assist in the grand finale. This lady was not above doing any work that was not of a strictly illegal nature, provided there was money in it; and she did not suppose that her husband was working for nothing but glory and his board. In a matter so important there could be no question that the reward to any one who would untangle the knot would be well worth the having.

"If we were in anything like a civilized community, the simplest way out would be to arrest that same King Kennedy the first time that he comes into the camp. Of course he must be in disguise; but Arlington's eyes are sharp enough to spot him, and I could add my humble efforts. But out here, when they get hold of a man they either want to hang him off-hand, or else let him go. They have no idea of holding on to a suspected person till something develops."

"I think perhaps it would be as well to see this Miss Hazzard. She took things entirely too coolly not to have some scheme of her own; and blind or not, I do not think that they could deceive her with Nola Norman. She must remember the girl, and would understand the game by instinct. I only wish I had seen the little Irishman, if for but a moment. I would play his part for him to-night, anyhow. As it is, it would be a good idea to take a fling around town and see what the outlook is. If Arlington is on hand I suppose I could count on him, and if anything happens to him he might thank his lucky stars that I am on deck. We will see."

The lady traveled with a trunk, consequently she was at no loss to provide for her excursion about town. When it was dark enough to conceal her movements a little, she slipped quietly out of the hotel. If Barney had seen her in the corridor he would have been puzzled, for no such gentleman as she appeared to be had ever come into the hotel.

No such awkward meeting occurred, however; and once on the street, the lady ruffled along as though it was second nature to wear the borrowed plumage of the other sex.

It was her intention to look around the town; but first of all she directed her steps to the little building that her husband had pointed out to her as that occupied by Miss Hazzard. She wanted to make her call at once, so as to see her before she started for the Odeon. She did not know that that night there was to be no performance, or she might have chosen an hour that was a little later.

"If the lady is blind it is not very likely that she can detect my disguise; and even if that is a pretense, I am willing to run the risk. It is not very likely that the girl will stay for the interview, and if she does, it will not make any great difference. If she detects a disguise, she will not know who is behind it. And it is not likely that she will make any confidential disclosures to her aunt. She will wait until King Kennedy comes. By that time it will make no difference."

So a dapper-looking young fellow, dressed as

though he was a business man, who wanted service, durability and neatness in his clothes, but who despised frills, knocked at the door of Miss Hazzard's abode, and was confronted in answer by the lady herself.

"Miss Hazzard, I suppose?" asked this visitor, looking up, to be certain that it was not the false Myrtle Mead.

"That is my name. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"My name is Sampson, madam—Samuel Sampson. My business is one that is not generally popular except with those who happen to need my services; and when they need them no more they generally go back to their first opinion. In other words I am a confidential agent; or what is usually called a detective. I had not intended to call upon you until tomorrow, but, as I heard that an unexplained attack had been made upon your niece, who was restored to you by something like a miracle, I thought it best not to wait too long, as there was no telling what might happen, even in a night. Of course I can guess—provided the information with which I was furnished at the start was correct—what the attack meant. The statement made to the young lady that there was money in it shows me that there are some persons planning to defeat the ends of justice, and divert the Ainslie-Richmond millions from the proper heirs. I came here to take proof of the identity of the young lady who has been known as your niece, but whom we suspect of being something even nearer. There is no question but that she needs protection, and the sooner she gets away from this wild country, where it is hardly safe for an honest man to penetrate, the better. If I can be of any service, command me. You probably do not know it, but the young lady's uncle is dead; and by the terms of the will he has left, and which has been duly recorded, she will be able to enter into possession of the estate as soon as the preliminaries are settled."

And all this lengthy statement was rattled off at a steady gallop, that sounded as though it was the natural gait of the individual making it, since by no possibility could any one else have got over the same ground in less than twice the time. Miss Hazzard listened like one amazed.

"You will pardon me if I say to you that I do not understand at all what you are talking about, and that I am pretty sure that you are an impostor. No living man could talk that fast about anything that was of an earthly bit of importance, and the most charitable construction I can put upon your conduct is that you are a crank. We who have unfortunately lost our sight go by our hearing, and we are apt to be frank in our speeches. Unless you have credentials I decline to harbor you a moment longer. Myrtle."

At the call, Myrtle answered so promptly that it seemed likely she had been very near to the inner door, and had heard what the visitor had been saying.

"Here, aunt," she said, as she glided into the room.

"Take a good look at this young man, and say if you saw him among the robbers who carried you off. I suspect that he is a spy, come to look over the ground before the gang makes another attack. If he makes a move that looks like danger, shoot him down. We cannot afford to run any risks."

The command, for such it was, came sharply from the lips of the elder lady. The visitor saw that the girl carried a cocked revolver in her hand, and that the weapon pointed very straight in his direction. A touch on the trigger was all that was needed to put an end forever to his interest in the Ainslie-Richmond affair.

"Quite right, madam, quite right," said the intruder, as coldly as though it was an everyday affair to be thus menaced, and speaking in the same rapid tone.

"That is part of the business. Been shot at more times than I have fingers and toes. They all do it, or try to, if it don't suit to have matters investigated. Of course I am working in the interest of the gentleman who employed me. Am looking over the ground first, to open the way in front of him, in case my investigations show that it is worth his while to come. Take it cool. If you don't want to talk to-night, perhaps you will have something to say in the morning. If so, send over to the hotel, and I will be happy to call on you."

"I do not remember to have ever seen him before," interrupted Myrtle. "The gentleman looks as though he might be what he represents himself to be, in spite of the nonsense he has been talking. He has probably made a mistake. If he has really anything of importance to say, it might be as well to allow him to call to-morrow—to-night we cannot listen to him."

"Thank you, miss. A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse. Good-evening." And very coolly did Mrs. Auburn bow herself out; but as she went she was saying: "What does Arlington mean? That is Myrtle or her ghost."

CHAPTER XXVI.

LEONA MAKES A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

THE result of the visit to Miss Hazzard was

that Leona Arlington went away thoroughly puzzled, and very anxious to see her husband.

As far as Miss Hazzard went she seemed to be about what she expected, though the goggles worn during the interview so shaded her face that it was almost impossible to note any changes in expression that might otherwise have been seen. But the light had fallen fairly on the face of the girl, when she stepped into the room, and Mrs. Arlington was as well satisfied as could be that this was the girl she had known as Myrtle Mead. And if there was any truth in the lady's statement that this was her niece, and that her own proper name was Wilder, then this was the true daughter of the duke. What other evidence he had to believe it Arlington had not told her, but doubtless it existed, or there would have never been an inquiry in this, or all possible directions.

But how had the young man who was posing here as McGinnis been so deceived? And how had King Kennedy been checkmated? Or was all the latter part of the story a fabrication or a delusion? If the latter, she wanted to hear something more about it; and if the former, she would have something to say.

The duke was not at the hotel, however! Though he had kept to his room for the greater part of the day it was not from lack of courage; but because, while affairs were shaping themselves, he thought it a good season to be making up for lost time, and getting his nerves in order by a little solid sleep. Now he was ready to racket around all night, and had started out on the war-path shortly after the interview with his wife. She had seen him going, and knew that it was not worth her while to look for him in the hotel. In addition, she did not care to appear there at present in the disguise that she wore, and the risk of detection was too great to go to the labor of changing it twice.

She knew something about the town, since its points of interest had come up incidentally during the recital of the story; and she thought that at this time in the evening it would not be hard to get on the trail of Arlington, even without asking any questions. He would most likely go to the saloon of the Odeon; and thitherward she turned her steps.

Things were quiet there. The hall for the stage-performance was dark, and the assembly in the saloon proper smaller than usual. After the excitement of the last two nights there was a reaction. A good many of the regulars had either stayed at home or gone somewhere else. The tables were going in the gambling room, but the duke was not there.

As her keen eyes roved around, they lit upon a face that somehow seemed familiar. It was a typical face, anyhow; and she felt she understood the owner of it, even if she had never met him before. The gentleman, in fact, was known at Hard Luck as Buck Banker, and he was there to keep an eye out for Howard Bromwell. He and his pard had been called in from the watch at the cabin of the Goldens, where nothing had rewarded their waiting; and there had been a hint that there would be a stroke of business that evening if they were in readiness.

The liberal advances that their employer had made, had not been entirely thrown away. They had not been drinking more than usual, and their general appearance had been greatly improved. Buck Banker would never be taken for a gentleman; but now he might easily pass for a superior sort of rough. He imagined, also, that the streak of bad luck that had been pursuing him and his pard for so long had been broken, and with a little capital at his command he would have been willing to try a hand or two, even with the chiefs of the card sharps of the camp.

The sight of the stranger, who looked around as though familiar with such places, but somewhat uncertain whether to assert himself, caused Buck to drift over in his direction.

Although Dandy Bill had not been heard of, and it began to be considered that he was dead or a cripple, Buck remembered the interest he had shown in the expected arrival of a little sport, who had been making things lively at Turkey Bend. Banker had about given up the idea that either the dude or the Irishman was the man; and this was the the next best chance to strike the sport. He lounged easily up, nodding as he came within distance.

"Evening, pard. Didn't I meet you at Turkey Bend not long ago?"

"Like as not. I visited that little but lively burg a short time since, and met a few of the boys. Can't say that I recall your name, though your face looks familiar. Probably you will remember Sampson—Sam Sampson—if we got around the same table."

"Remember it now, like a book. My name is Banker. Shall we drink?"

"Not unless you are dry. It's lonesome unless one has the house with him, and as a stranger I don't care to call it up. Sometimes you hit a bad man, who makes trouble on a general invitation. What sort of a game do they run here, anyhow?"

"Square as a die, and the boys that buck it are of the same pattern. You can't go wrong

in the Odeon, and you can hunt a good while before you can find a house where the boss looks after the lambs like Buckle does. Why, only last night there was a little racket begun here, half a dozen men had their irons out, and you would have thought there was going to be blood on the floor by the bucketful. And Ed, he just waltzed in with that little switch of his, and he soothed them down before you could have cracked your finger. By the time he had made his little speech the dude that started the racket had skipped out of the nearest window, and everything was lovely."

"The dude? What sort of an animal was he? Hard Luck don't seem a likely sort of place for him to flourish."

"It ain't; but this here fellow wandered in; and they give most anything a show, if it behaves itself. Some call him the duke, and I reckon he ain't as big a fool as he looks. Some of those Englishmen are sports from 'way back. This one hits like a trip-hammer, and I guess can be a daisy with his derringers, too. So far the camp can't quite make him out, and after what happened he is being watched. Some think that he is a fool, and some think that he's a bite, laying back to make a good meal out of the boys when he gets good and ready. They can have him. I don't think that I want any of him in mine."

"Think he has stamps, eh; and knows how to make 'em grow?"

"That's what some think; but I think that the pile wouldn't pay for the risk, if he is a sport. I know he was flat broke when he struck the camp, but there was money waiting for him here, and he shows it up free enough. But it stands to reason that he can't have any big sum, or it wouldn't be lying around waiting him in a place like Hard Luck."

"Oh, those that want to fly at that sort of game are welcome to all they can make of it, as you say. But I don't mind seeing the fun, if there is any. Is the sport around to-night?"

"Haven't seen him. Like as not he has dropped in at the Paint Shop. I would look around that way myself if I was not waiting here to see a man."

"Thanks. I won't ask you to leave headquarters, but if you will tell me where the Paint Shop is I may drop in there. I generally take in the whole town when I start in to make a night out."

Banker naturally suspected that the man beside him had a notion of hunting up the dude; and he would have liked very much to have seen the encounter that would probably follow. This little fellow, with the snappy eyes and brisk motions, looked as though he knew a thing or two; and if he was the sport that he more than half suspected he was, then there would be fun worth seeing if the two came together.

In a few words he told all about the Red Paint Saloon, and where it was located, adding:

"Mind you, I don't say that you will find him there, or that there will be any sport in him if you do; but as they bluffed him pretty hard here last night, it's like enough that he will change his stamping-grounds. If he meant to go into business here he would have been around before this."

"All right. If you can't come along I'll look around that way on my own hook, and if nothing turns up I may see you here, later. I would sooner tackle outside talent a while before I settle down to the local chiefs."

With a nod the disguised woman turned away. She had seen what Banker had not noticed, that an elderly looking gentleman was following them with his eyes, and seemed to be trying to catch the attention of Banker.

"Um!" thought she, moving carelessly away. "It appears to me that there is something familiar about that party. This is nothing but a rough, in spite of his fine feathers and good behavior. What business have they together? Perhaps I am a little crazy on this affair, but I would take small odds that it has something to do with the case in hand. Can't I get on to what they have to say? I'll try it, anyhow."

She sauntered idly on for a few paces, and then stopped to glance at the game that was going on at the nearest table. Banker had caught sight of Howard Bromwell, and had moved off to give him a chance to meet him. That diverted his attention from the person he had just parted with, and when he did give a glance to see if he had left the room he was no longer in view.

A scarcely perceptible movement of Bromwell guided his actions. He left the building himself and strolled down the street. A figure dimly seen at some distance seemed to be that of the little sport on his way to the Red Paint Saloon, and so the young man was entirely dismissed from his mind.

After a little Bromwell joined him. It did not seem worth while to go any great distance, or make anything of a mystery out of their interview. The street was lonely and deserted, and as the hour for action was almost at hand there was little time to waste. They were together but a moment, and in that time Bromwell simply muttered in his huskiest whisper:

"The original plan stands. I have found the article, and will have it for you precisely at

midnight at the cabin. Both of you be there, or I will be asking the reason why."

"Count us there, boss," responded Banker.

They separated at once, and without further explanation. Neither suspected what a sharp pair of ears had been wide open at the distance of only a few yards. Mrs. Auburn was on the trail, and what she did not hear was not worth the hearing. When they moved away she followed Howard Bromwell.

He had no idea that he had been observed, yet he moved with a caution that was of itself suspicious, and that required the greatest care in his shadow.

Yet she held to him, remained unseen and unsuspected; and at last saw him vanish through the doorway that led into Miss Hazzard's cabin.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"HANDS UP, OR DOWN YOU GO!"

WHEN Ben Bowlding looked at the two for the last time that night, they were sleeping quietly enough, but the act seemed to waken them both.

"Mr. Gallagin—if that is your name!"

Very quietly did the young lady speak, but her words reached the ears of his companion. He straightened himself up, and answered immediately.

Then she continued:

"Do you know anything about that man?"

"Faith, and it's not quite as much as Oi know about you, and that's not sayin' a h'ape."

"I suspect him. Have you not seen him? He is not showing his true clors at all. He is in disguise. Since he continues it with us it must be for a bad purpose. It may be that he is one of the rustlers, and that he is keeping us here until the balance of his party can find us."

"It's mighty cool that you have been taking it, thin. You slept loike a little lamb, an', dea'ved by it, Oi even took a wink or two meself. Shall Oi blow him cowld when he comes back?"

"No, no! He may not be as bad as I fear, and at best that would be murder. But this scheme of his to induce us to cross the river—it makes me doubly suspicious. Can we not make our escape from him while he is on his rounds?"

"Av ye are willin', McGallagin is ready. An' ye don't want to spind much toime discussin' av the way. It's either go or stay, an' that right off. He will be back in a minute."

"Go, then!" exclaimed Gladys, leaping to her feet. "We will not run the risk of his treachery, if you think there is a chance to escape him."

"Sure, an' av it was ownly to drap him that ye wor wantin' it's Phelim McGallagin that would till him so av ye said the worrud; an' av he didn't loike it phat could he do more than kick? But av ye would sooner run away Oi'm the lad, all the same."

Phelim was up and at the horses; before he ceased speaking he had the two they had ridden ready for the trail.

Gladys did not hesitate. She sprung lightly from the hand of Phelim to the saddle, and the two rode quietly away in the night. Before Ben Bowlding returned they were a mile from the spot.

As they did not pursue the exact course they had been traveling before they turned aside to rest till the moon rose, and as the ground favored them it was not very likely that he would be able to strike their trail before morning.

The rest had done everybody good, even to the mustangs. They enjoyed the gallop into which they struck as soon as they got out of hearing distance of their late camp, and Gladys was in better spirits than she had been since her rescue. With the horses going level and fast and the girl once more in a hopeful mood, it was no wonder that she was inclined to talk.

"We were speaking of various confidential things just about the time that man interrupted us. I am glad now that we said nothing to him that might enlighten him in regard to the facts of the case. He will still think that I am Myrtle Mead; and cannot tell any of his comrades differently."

"An' how about Phelim McGallagin? He has stuck by ye in thick and thin, an' it 'pears ter me that ye moight be given' a little av that same confidential discourse in this d'rection."

"It's not Miss Myrtle Mead, at all, that you are; an' av ye ain't, how did ye get here? Ye look loike the girrul Oi saw and heard as far back as last night at the Odeon, but av ye are not her what did the thaves av the worrud want wid you?"

"You are right, all around. I am the girl that was taken from the stage there."

"A bigger mistake never happened, if they took me away for Myrtle Mead. She was sick that evening, and I was on in her place. Not even Buckle knew of the substitution, which had been made before. We worked together for a year, you remember, and we can duplicate each other's acts in a way that would bewilder any one who was not in the secret. While I was swinging on the trapeze I suddenly saw King Kennedy looking at me with his baleful eyes. The sight unnerved me, for I had thought

for a year or two that he was dead. I fell to the stage, but had my bones saved by the other gentleman. Then I was carried away without any one discovering the mistake."

"We rode far into the night, and when I at last was allowed to dismount I was too tired and too desperate to care to enlighten the outlaws. They were so brave that I almost pitied their confusion when the truth might come out."

"To my surprise there was another young lady in the camp, who looked enough like me to make me recognize her in an instant. Even when we worked together I had not been very friendly with Nola Norman, and yet at first I was ready to hail her appearance with delight. After a little I discovered that she was in league with these villainous 'Men of the Moon.' She exchanged clothes with me, and set out for Hard Luck."

"After that they hurried me away. There is a fortune in the air for some one, and it certainly is not for Nola, unless she gains it by fraud. That must be the scheme, since King Kennedy would dearly love to have that and what he considers his revenge at the same time."

Phelim listened attentively, but shook his head as though he did not understand the story any too well. It did seem a little strange, the confidential tone adopted by the young lady; though of course it was natural that, after the efforts he had made in her behalf, she should feel confidence in him as her friend.

"An' av Oi moight be so bowld as to ask, phat wor ye doin' all this toime, cavertin' round in ther bushes beyandt Harrud Luck? An' phat way did ye come to know all about ther Richmond fortune? It's a mix, so it is, that Oi don't understand meself."

"I can hardly explain. Indeed, if it is a secret at all it is not mine, and I would not discuss it, save to say that it was for the sake of another, who claimed to have good reasons for living a life of retracy. That person seemed to know something about the fortune that was in England, and some day to fall to the lot of the true heir of Hugh Richmond. Something more I heard during the year that I was working with the other girls. Myrtle knew of it, and we talked of it more than once, though it was in a quiet way."

"An' phat wor the two av yez, heiresses to wealth untowld, doin', swingin' by the toes av yez to a trapeze? Foine worruk for the daughter av a duke."

"True, but we were not to blame for that. We came well by the employment. Hugh Richmond's wife was a gymnast when he married her, and before his child was fairly able to talk she was in training for the same trade. A woman must live, and when he deserted her what wonder that his wife went back to the old work? There was no other thing at which she could make a living so well. Of course she supposed that she was only returning to it for a brief season; but the years went by fast, and before she knew it she was too old to risk her life so recklessly as she had been doing; and her daughter was not too young to take up life in the ring and on the stage where the mother left off. If an excuse is needed, that certainly is enough."

"Av Hugh Richmond had deserted her, yis. But av they are a qu'are set Oi never heard av their bein' that kind. Whin they toie to man or woman they're all there to stay."

"Perhaps it was a mistake. I don't know why I should be talking so freely to you about this, unless it is because I think that you have some connection with the family. From what I have heard, I believe that the young man I saw with you when I first met you is one of the family. If not, how did you get the knowledge of matters that you certainly have?"

Phelim gave a chuckle.

"Av he looks loike the Richmonds, a precious qu'are-lookin' lot they must be. But it's dodgin' av my suggistion that you are. Mebbe the duke wouldn't have been so willin' to have her av she had not been entoiwed away herself."

"Say driven away from the spot where he left her; and by this same King Kennedy, who has ever been the evil genius of the woman who was Hugh Richmond's wife. It was the sight of his face that made me lose my wits the other night. It appeared so suddenly, and I had been so sure that the man was dead."

"Sure, an' Oi belave you, me girrul. The toime has come to clear it all up, and whoever is deservin' will get all that's comin' to 'em. An' av we want to get in our worruk in shape, the bist thing in the market is to git to Harrud Luck afore King Kennedy foindes out the mish-take he has made."

"Now that I have told you more, perhaps, than I should, do you not think that I am entitled to some confidence in return? I think that the end is approaching; but in what shape is it to come? Is King Kennedy to receive the reward of his treachery? Is the daughter of Hugh Richmond to receive the wealth that is rightfully hers? Who was the young man that caught me when I fell, and why is he here? And what have you to do with the grand finale? You have told me something of this, I admit; but since I have trusted you so far, perhaps

you would want to add something; to make some corrections to what you have already said."

"Niver a correction, me darlint. It's just nothin' at all we'll be afther sayin' ontill we get to Harrud Luck. An' be the same token, it looks as if the thruble was not all over yet. Phat is that Oi say forninst me?"

His eyes were quick to note the figures that arose a dozen yards or so in front of them; but while his hand dropped to his belt, and his eyes were fixed in that direction, he did not note the half dozen others that appeared at side and rear as he instinctively tightened rein. It was a trick that worked like a charm. Before he could draw, there was a sharp clicking of hammers and the stern order: "Hands up, or down you go!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BEN BOWLDING GETS A SURPRISE.

BEN BOWLDING had warned them that the direct route to Hard Luck was specially unsafe; but he had not explained what they might look for in the way, since it had been agreed not to try it. He might have said that he had learned that there was an outlying squad of the Men of the Moon, placed there as a reserve for one thing; and to meet any pursuit that might be made from the camp beyond.

If Phelim had been certain that the men whom he first saw were foes, he might have been able to make a more successful resistance; but while he was looking at them he lost his chance. After he was right at the muzzles of the men at his side he would not have shown courage but rather foolhardiness if he had attempted resistance. He could neither fight nor run away; and as the next best thing he promptly elevated his hands.

"Howld on, Mither av Moses, howld on!" he shouted, in a quavering voice.

"Oi'm poor but honest, an' the fri'nd av all white men! Put down them guns. It's niver once will Oi be thinkin' av disputin' wid sich jontlemin as you, an' av ye listin to me it's little yez would care to be puttin' me mither's eldest in such danger. Say phat ye want, an' it's yours av we have it in the shop."

"To thunder with you!" retorted the spokesman.

"The captain has it in for you, so that you may as well go now as a little later. But it's the article you have with you that we're takin' stock ov. Looks as if there might be something wrong here, and we are going to see what it is if it takes a wheel off. Ride up to the rack and let us know what you are made of. And you, Dennis, come along and give an account of yourself. If this is another of your tricks it will be the wind up, and don't you forget it."

Once more his resemblance to the outlaw named Dennis had deceived the Men of the Moon, and given him a chance for a breathing spell. There was no one living who could adapt himself to circumstances more quickly than Phelim.

Without hesitation he touched the flank of his horse with his heel and moved toward the speaker, who was among those in front.

When he had thrown up his hands he had thrown up his revolvers at the same time, trusting to the uncertain light to keep the action unnoticed. It was better than an attempt to pull on the party at once, since it left him as well off as ever, and gave them a chance to get off their guard. After such prompt obedience they would no doubt think there was no danger of any further trouble about the capture.

Of course, Gladys obeyed the command at the same time. It was addressed to her, and it would not have been safe for Phelim if he had advanced alone.

"Tumble off, there, tumble off! I guess you won't need that mustang again. By the heavens, boys, he was running off with the prisoner!"

The command to dismount was just what Phelim was willing to hear. Off from his horse he rolled, and as he went he managed to turn himself slightly and give the mustang of Gladys a savage thrust with his spur, that sent it darting straight forward, while he swung himself behind his horse, which was now between him and the outlaws, and served as well as a fortification.

"And now thin, phat is it that we wants with me?"

Resistance in the first place may have been looked for; but after the seeming surrender, and considering the opinion they had of the man they supposed Phelim to be, the double movement was a complete surprise. When the mustang of Gladys darted off there was a general move in that direction; but it was checked at the demonstration of the Irishman. They wheeled at him as one man, and Gladys went through.

A woman could be taken at any time; but the man looked as though he needed attending to at once.

"You whelp, you," gritted the man who had spoken before. "It's not Dennis, after all; and so much the worse for you. There is a man around here, perhaps, that we don't want to kill until we see how he looks when we have turned him inside out. If you are that man

you will have a chance for your life if you surrender at once; but there won't be much foolishness over it. Two of you look after the girl. It don't take an army to attend to one man, and I guess he will listen to reason. Now, you, step out with your hands up. We won't trifle too long, and it's the chance of your life that we haven't begun to shoot before this."

He spoke a little uncertainly, but the surprise was over, and if Phelim intended to show fight he had lost the moment for slaughter. The chances were now more than even against him.

"An' av ye wants me to surrender at discretion very little do ye know av Phelim McGallagin. Phat terms do ye pripose? Av ye sind a commissioner it may be that Oi will tr'ate wid him; but it must all be according to the arthicles av war, or divil a sthep will Oi move, but doie in the last ditch. Is King Kennedy there? Av he is, lit him sthep forwards."

"What do I know or care about King Kennedy? You are barking up the wrong tree. Ah, take him, Tom!"

Very quietly one of the men had slipped up behind, and as the leader spoke, swung a clubbed carbine over his shoulder, and aimed a crushing blow at the head of the Irishman.

That is, he aimed it, but the blow never started on its way. There was a little puff of smoke and flame, a report, and the man tumbled over backward. Some one else had taken a hand in the game.

The interruption was as unexpected to Phelim as it was to the rest, but he was not so far thrown off of his balance as to be unable to promptly take advantage of it. It had never seemed his policy to shoot as long as there was anything else to do. He did not pull trigger now, but strictly carried out the programme as he had already arranged it.

He had recognized the fact that though the mustang he rode was a good one, the work of the past night and day had taken a good deal out of him, and that he could not be expected to cope with the fresher animals of this party of rustlers. Even if he got away now it would be but a brief time until he was brought again to bay, and in a solid fight there would be no chance for him. These men were no doubt all picked fighters, and were full of courage, so that shooting a couple—if he was lucky enough to do it—would not drive them off. They would only be the more set on getting their hands on him. And then, no matter who they might be convinced he was, they would make very short work of him.

So he took advantage of the diversion, and darted forward at the man who had been acting as spokesman, just as every eye was caught by the flash. He was on the ground, and as he stooped as he sprung, the attack was unnoticed. He caught the man by the foot, and by a dexterous move canted him out of the saddle, into which he threw himself, in spite of the start given by the frightened horse.

After that there would have been a good fighting chance, if the man who had so opportunely struck it had only remained to finish the work.

But he was already darting away toward Gladys, who was urging on her mustang, and losing ground every moment. The two that had shot off at the order of the leader were better mounted, and bound to overtake her before she had gone half a mile.

Small blame could Phelim throw on the man for that, since it was the very move he intended to make himself. He had his pistols ready once more, and there was some lively practice as he urged his horse into a dead run, that speedily left the rest behind.

A couple of shots only did Phelim fire, and then he reserved the charges in his revolvers until he could use them with more certainty. He bent low in the saddle and kept the horse at its best.

Before long the firing from the rear ceased. The bullets had hissed uncomfortably near, but none of them had done any damage, and he was getting so near to the two who were after Gladys that there was as much likelihood of striking a rustler as a fugitive. And by this time Phelim had found himself once more in the company of Ben Bowlding.

It was time that they were coming. The two rustlers were bent on obeying orders, but the noise of the firing behind and the excitement of the chase had stirred their blood up to fever-pitch, and they cared not to waste more time in a pursuit the importance of which they did not fully understand. Up went the hand of one of them; there was a crash, and the mustang of Gladys gave a sudden lurch and then went crashing to the ground, casting her far over its head.

A savage cry left the lips of Bowlding as he saw her fall. His hands flew up, and the two men went down. Then, without a thought of those coming in the rear, he flung himself from his horse, darted to the side of the insensible girl and raised her in his arms, holding her so that the moonlight fell full on her death-white face.

There was no question but what the girl was senseless; and it was not so certain that she was not dead.

But very much to the surprise of Phelim was it that he saw the rough-looking borderman so deeply affected. He only took time for a single glance, but that showed the man totally oblivious to everything but the pale face at which he was staring.

"Heavens above! It is not Myrtle Mead, after all!"

So he exclaimed, as he once more read those features by the moonlight, and in his surprise he staggered back. Gladys slipped through his yielding arms, and she dropped to the ground just as Phelim opened fire on the men that came surging up to the attack.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BAD MAN FROM BUMBLEBEE.

"Now I must see Arlington," thought Leona, as she turned away, after seeing where Howard Bromwell went to.

"Here is the wrinkle that he is not up to, and it wants to be smoothed out in a hurry or an awful mess it will make of things. Dollars to dimes that there is to be a flitting; and if the trail is once lost no easy matter will it be to pick it up again. I want Auburn, I want him at once, and I want him bad. I suppose that I must try the Paint Shop, for it won't do to be sending messengers around to hunt him up. He is altogether too much marked a character as it is. What can he be doing there, anyhow?"

She had lingered a few moments to see that Bromwell did not come out again, though she was reasonably sure that she had placed him where he belonged; and was already framing a theory to fit the facts as she had found them. As she hurried along things began to grow clearer, and she believed she would be able to make her husband open his eyes when he heard the pointers that she was arranging in her mind.

Auburn was at the Red Paint Saloon, sure enough. He went for a double purpose, with one or two minor inducements thrown in.

There might be a chance to hear something in regard to the missing Kemp; and he understood that he was more likely to hear there than even at the Odeon.

Then there was Jim Flemming. He had not shown up at the Odeon since the racket, and it was not very likely that he would, if Auburn was right in his suspicion that the man was a fraud, the first letter of whose name was King Kennedy.

During his experience in the Western country, which had extended over several years, Arlington Auburn had found that his appearance was very much against him. It brought him into no end of trouble. He was always considered to be fair game; or else some one in disguise. The bad men kept him busy, and the good men did not care to have much to do with him.

Hard Luck had so far treated him better than the average; partly because of the promptness he had shown when Miss Myrtle—or her substitute—had fallen, and partly because of the hint that Dandy Bill had given in regard to a stranger-sport that he expected to come wandering through.

There was nothing to be heard in regard to Kemp, and so far as he could see, Jim Flemming was not about. He took a seat, and before he well knew what he was about he was in the thick of a game with several men whom he did not remember to have ever seen before in his life. As he met them fully half-way, he could hardly say that he had been roped in; and as the party with whom he sat down were playing him very cautiously, to see if he developed into the chief they had heard was coming, it was about an even thing all around.

It was while he was thus engaged, and when luck seemed to be running exactly even for everybody, that the lady in disguise approached the saloon.

She sauntered up to the door, like the stranger that she was, and glanced around at the outside of the building, taking mental notes. Her footsteps were very light, and it was no wonder that though she had no intention of concealing her approach it was not noticed by the two men that stood at the door of the Paint Shop, and who were peering into the room at some one or some thing that seemed to greatly excite their interest.

Leona saw them, heard a few muttered words—and then thought it was worth her while to hear the rest. She slipped up closely to the side of the building, and stood there, holding a match in one hand, a cigar in the other, for the purpose of covering her actions in case her presence was discovered. There was a lively little breeze blowing down the street, and if it was worked in carefully the action of striking a match at the proper time would be enough to disarm ordinary suspicion.

After the movement the first words she heard were from the nearest of the two men.

"All right, I have him down fine. That's the man, is it? Let me look at him again. Why, blast my eyes! If it ain't! Englishman be hanged! It's the Dude Detective, sure as guns. They call him the Fighting Dude sometimes. He's not so much on the shoot, when anything else will do, but he can be a holy terror when the time comes. If he is after you, the sooner

you make up your mind to cut stick, throw him cold, or leave the country in a wooden overcoat the better you will know what is coming. He's just old lightning, and don't you forget it."

"The Fighting Dude! Who is he? Don't know that I ever heard of him before; and I thought I knew about all the big guns that work in these regions."

"He may not be just the biggest kind of a gun, for he don't often work alone on a case; but he's a mighty bad man on the trail. He never talks very much, but he's the deuce to do. He don't look like it, but if he ever hits you to keep, I'll bet a horse to a hen that he breaks your jaw. I saw him do that very trick, and he didn't seem to more than half try. If you think of a jingle with him, better get him where you can shoot first and chin afterward. And if you think he is down here to get points on you, I tell you sure and solemn that he ought not to go out of the house alive if you can find a chance to scoop him. And if he gets out of the door he ought to go up the flume, anyway; if it takes an army to get there."

"Don't be alarmed. None of the boys here knew him and I didn't want to send him out of the wet till I knew who he was, for fear it was a man that I wanted to hear talk before he turned his toes up. I'll look after him right now, chance or no chance."

Leona did not think that it was safe to attempt to hear more. She understood that one of these men had been brought there by the other to identify "the duke," and that he had done the work without effort or mistake. At a place like the Paint Shop it was not hard to find an excuse for a difficulty, and she thought it was better to try to get within supporting distance of her husband and if possible warn him of the danger, than to attempt to learn more of the plans of the speakers. If she could get near enough to fix their faces, that would be far better.

Slipping gently back, she came forward again at a brisk gait and made straight for the door of the saloon where the two still lingered. Of course she had to run the chance that they had seen her backing and filling; but that was not very likely, and anyhow they would not recognize her in that garb. She had never been in the least identified with her husband in a professional way.

The two men started as she suddenly appeared at their elbows, stepping forward as though she meant to pass between them.

The man that had identified Arlington as the Dude Detective stepped a little more to one side to leave room. The action was in keeping with his appearance. From his looks she would never have supposed that he was in league with a band of outlaws.

The other acted his assumed character up to nature. Had she not caught a glimpse of him before, so that there could be no mistake, she never would have suspected that the tough-looking individual, who lurched toward instead of away from her, with a half-formed intention of barring her way, was one of the two that she had heard talking in the doorway.

Her hand dropped easily into the side pocket of the loose sack-coat that she wore. It was not certain that she had not been seen, and this man, if there was anything in the words she had just heard him utter, would not hesitate much to trample down a skulker that he had an idea might block his game.

He was ragged, dirty, and looked as though he might be under the influence of whisky. He mumbled something, and then, as his partner stepped back, stumbled forward, entering the room first.

As he made no further demonstration, he was not noticed particularly. The Paint Shop had a miscellaneous assortment of patrons, and all of them were welcome if they had money and spent it without interfering too much with the general comfort. He sunk heavily into a chair and stared around him after the manner of a man getting the rights of things in a strange place. If Leona had not been using a pair of very keen eyes to the best advantage, she would not have seen that the man was neither alone in the house, nor altogether unknown to several individuals, who glanced his way, and then made certain movements that she was certain were signals.

So much more reason was there to get near to Arlington. She drifted up that way until she was nearly at his shoulder, and then waited until there might be a chance to whisper a word of warning into his ear. She was a little surprised to find that the ragged man had moved as quietly and as promptly as herself, and was at the table sooner, if anything, than she was. He was standing there with every appearance of drunken gravity, watching the game.

"Under and over—hic—an' one at er time," he mumbled. "Slip 'em in jest ez they be—hic—an' now he slips the cut—hic—an' thar yer hev it—five aces ag'in' three pair ov kings. W'ot better yer want?"

In his drunken way he followed Auburn as he shuffled and dealt, throwing in his words in such a way that he seemed to be only talking to himself, but loud enough for every one near to catch their sense. And as it happened that

Auburn had three aces in his hand, and the man on his right a pair of kings, it was peculiarly irritating.

Auburn glanced at his cards, allowed them to drop together with the edges resting on the table, the face of the lower one toward him, while, looking up at the man, he slowly murmured:

"Weally, aw, disgusting, don'chaw know?"

"Who yer—hic—talkin' to?" retorted the man, in savage drunkenness of speech. "Hic—can't a man think aloud, when he sees a slick thing while he's takin' notes? W'y—hic—I played that when you war a kid, an' a mighty-mighty clean game it are. Do it some more. You got ther nerve—hic—ov a brass monkey, an' that's what it takes—hic—ter play a skin game at ther Paint Shop."

"Wha's the bouncer?" asked Auburn, with a bewildered look around.

"Ev'ry man's his own bouncer—hic—at ther Paint Shop," retorted the man, with the gravity of an inebriate, and the wisdom of a Solon.

"Ef you think he's needed better begin. But ef I—hic—had four or five aces I'd play 'em fu'st, an' bounce afterward. But it don't make no differs fur ez I go. I'm a pore, lone cripple, fur frum home, but mighty-mighty foud ov fun."

"Oh, get out here," said the man, with the pair of kings, not taking much stock in the maunderings of the drunken man, and rather inclined to run the risks on the excellent start he had.

"Ef you don't dry up you'll think a leetle yaller dorg hez tromped all over yer. Sich a gerloot ez you be hed better be under ther pump afore yer goes inter company. An' that's whar you'll go, mighty sudden, ef yer keeps that up."

"Whoop-ee! That's what I like ter hear! Hic! Come fur yer Uncle Jacob. Thar's a heap ov fun, in the son ov a gun, ef yer don't run, so w'y don't you come? Oh, I'm the bad man from Bumblebee, an' you kin hear me buzzin' ef you'll on'y stop ter listen. An' ef that don't do, it won't be hard ter find my stinger! Bounce him, will yer? It don't lay in ther boots ov ary two men—spit on yer hands an' then take hold."

He spit on his own hands by way of example, and then smacked them together with a noise that was heard ail over the room. At the same time he stumbled forward with his eyes fixed on Auburn.

CHAPTER XXX.

A BAD NIGHT FOR LISTENERS.

LEONA had the chance to hurriedly whisper into the ear of the dude: "It's King Kennedy or his man." Then she fell back enough to have a fair chance to see what was coming.

It was not any attack that the one man might make that Leona feared. If Arlington Auburn could not take care of himself against one man, she would have been apt to let him alone, and to receive what he got. But, after the way in which he had been almost mobbed the other night, at the Odeon, it was more than likely the gang would be on hand, and that they would strike in without as much delay as they showed on the previous occasion. Her hands rested in her side-pockets once more, and she was keenly watching the crowd that drifted that way at the sounds of the brewing tempest.

Fortunately for Auburn the man with the kings was playing his own game, and did not thank any one to take care of his interests—especially a man that was drunk. He was just in humor for a riot, and he construed the movement as directed toward him. There had been no betting, so that there were no stakes to look after, and he was a fellow that never backed down for a stranger. Up he bounced, kicking his chair behind him as he sprung at the man who claimed to be from Bumblebee.

There never was a greater miscalculation. He intended to catch the interloper by the scruff of the neck and the slack of the pantaloons, then waltz him out of doors before he knew what had hold of him.

He didn't do anything of the kind. It was King Kennedy that was in front of him, even if he did not know it; and when the seemingly drunken man straightened himself, and let go from the shoulder, he rolled out of the way like a falling log, and was counted out on the first round.

That left the way open to the dude, who had recognized his man after the warning he had received, and was waiting for whatever came. Kennedy was a hurricane hitter; but Arlington had been a stopper by profession, and was not afraid of the first rush of any man if he had room according to his size. When Kennedy struck wickedly at his face, so soon afterward that not one man in a thousand would have suspected that the blow was coming or been ready for it, Arlington lightly parried the stroke, and put in a return that sent the larger man reeling back. Then, quick as a cat, Auburn dashed at him again, aiming a right-hander, that would not have gone far from breaking his jaw if it had landed as it was intended.

Unable to guard, King Kennedy ducked his head, and so the stroke caught him higher up

than Auburn would have cared to land it if he had been given his choice.

This time Kennedy fell, and as he fell there was a double report, and a howl of pain from behind the dude. Leona's eyes were everywhere, and she had seen a man bring a derring from a hip pocket. He held it at a ready, waiting until he could get a chance to shoot without raising it from where he held it, level with his hip.

It was a game that two could play at, and just in time Leona pulled the trigger of the derring that was resting in her own side-pocket.

The ball sped true, tearing through the fingers that were crooked through the trigger-guard, just as they tightened on the trigger.

So neatly was the work timed and done that no one could suspect who did it, nor, if the man had not dropped his derring and shaken his bleeding fingers, would it have been easy to have guessed what had occurred. Still the shots, which came so nearly together that very few were able to separate them, served as a signal. On the instant the lights in that end of the room went out, while for a second time King Kennedy was dragged away from in front of the Fighting Dude.

Auburn was not caught napping, nor was his wife. When she went on such excursions as these she generally managed to play her part as well as the best of them. They sprung together, caught hands, and slipped away, only striking two blows with clubbed derringers, to clear the way of the shadows they could dimly discern before them. They kept by the wall; the crowd came sweeping down the middle of the room; and so, before it was generally known what had happened, they were well out of the Paint Shop, and slipping away at a great rate, Leona taking the lead.

"By the skin of our teeth," she laughed, a few moments later, as they listened, somewhat breathless, to the angry chorus that was rising behind them. "It would have simplified matters amazingly if some one had shot the gentleman from Bumblebee off-hand. He meant to do for you the best he knew how. That was what he went in there for. He has you down fine."

"I nevah dwah on a man with his hands up. It would be mu'daw," responded the dude, with less excitement than usual in his tone. "What are yaw doing heah?"

"Saving your life for one thing; saving your case for another. I tracked the man you call Howard Bromwell into Miss Hazzard's cabin this evening, where I had previously called on the lady herself, and seen the young lady of the trapeze. You may think what you choose, but the girl I saw there was the one that was always known as Myrtle Mead. There is some hocus-pocus behind this, all; and there will be a chance to get onto it to-night. There is an appointment at what Bromwell called 'the cabin,' that will probably explain it. It was to have you ready to follow them that I ventured into that pandemonium. I am afraid we will be too late, for it is perilously nigh to the hour already."

"No mattah. I know the place."

"Well, I would just as soon see the party leave Miss Hazzard's roof-tree, and we will drift around that way. As we go along I can tell you what I have been doing, and you can make up your mind what it amounts to."

Auburn listened to the little story that followed with a smile on his face. He did not express any surprise at what he heard—indeed, he did not express any opinion at all, at its close, save as embodied in his stock expression:

"Weally, disgusting, don'chaw know?"

"I am afraid it is more than disgusting," retorted Leona, looking at the dark windows of Miss Hazzard's cabin. "The birds have flown. The meeting with the men was to be at midnight, and it is nearly that time now. They would not be here until the last minute."

"All wight, we'll follow. Knew it like a book."

By intuition the dude felt that the cabin alluded to was the deserted one where he and Phelim had first seen Banker and his pard, and thitherward he led their steps. The distance was rather long for a stroll, but as there was no help for it, they strode away without hesitation.

Pretty well tired they were before they reached the Holden shanty; but as they approached they were rewarded by seeing a stray gleam of light through one of the chinks and hearing the low murmur of voices. The light disappeared, though the murmur went on.

"In one way I pity you, girl—though I have no desire that harm should come to you. I think I have provided against that, though we will have to run the chances. After the fraud that you have attempted to perpetrate there is scarcely any punishment that would be too great for the crime, but I have a tender heart in spite of all that has happened. When once we are fairly safe you will be suffered to go your way. At least, that is my intention."

"No fraud have I been guilty of. It is you that have been reveling in fraud, or hoped to. You are not the true Miss Hazzard. You are not Rhoda Wilder. Who are you? Speak, and tell the truth—if you dare!"

That answering voice was like Myrtle Mead's,

no doubt, but Auburn recognized it as the voice of the girl that he had heard talking to King Kennedy when he surprised them in front of the cabin in Hard Luck the night before. The words were such as he would expect to hear from the self-confessed adventuress, who would never let go, though hope might seem to be over. The reply surprised him more than a little.

"Whoever I may be I am working in the interests of the true heir whom you so basely tried to personate. I was blind, you thought; you knew all the story and so much of the past life of Myrtle Mead; were so much like her in voice and build, that you thought you could steal her friends and fortunes. You dreamed that the deceit would not be discovered by me, and that I would finish the work for you. Poor fool! While you thought that the true Myrtle had been ravished away and was already far on the path to the border, and the regions from which there would be no returning, she was snugly ensconced at home, waiting with me to see how far the villainous plot would be carried. When you had consigned my girl to such a fate, what mercy did you think you would deserve at my hands if the foul plot was ever unraveled, and my time for vengeance came? I have suffered much at the hands of this man who calls himself King Kennedy, but this last stroke would have been the vilest of all if I had been unprepared to meet it. Sometimes I feel that I dare not let you go, and that it is the duty of my life to hound him down to the death."

"Do as you please, madam; but don't forget that talk is something else. If any harm comes to me it will be fearfully punished. He will strike long before you have finished your bounding, and when he does strike it will be quick and hard. To the death, most likely."

"Ah, say you so? Then perhaps it were best to have all the satisfaction in advance. You may be weaving your own shroud by this wild talk."

"Wild or not, I speak but the truth."

So far the listeners heard, and then Auburn dropped under a crushing blow from behind, while Leona was seized around the waist and flung to the ground with a violence that temporarily bereft her of her senses.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RUNNING FIGHT ENDS IN A VICTORY.

PHELIM recognized the fact that he was well-mounted.

That gave him confidence, and left his head cool. He saw that for the present he could not expect much aid from Bowlding, and unless he could lead these men away, it was more than likely that some chance bullet would find its billet with one of the two who were behind him.

His horse answered to the touch of the rein that he gave, and turned as though on a pivot. Bending low in the saddle, he urged him at nearly right angles to his former course, and rattled off two or three shots, that by good luck as much as any especial marksmanship, hit to count. Two horses were hurt, and a man was dismounted.

That brought the attention of every one on him. As that meant bullets his way, and a hard pursuit, he was likely to have his hands full, unless his horse had the heels of the rest, and his good luck continued. So far he had remained untouched, but with such odds on their side, his turn ought to come soon. When he saw that they were following him in earnest, he sent back a ringing cry of defiance, and urged his horse to let out another link or two.

The steed responded promptly, and would have left the outlaws speedily behind. The cry was unfortunate.

It was answered by a discharge of revolvers from the men in the chase, and Phelim felt a painful shock in his right arm, a little below the elbow. Mechanically his fingers flew open, he reeled in the saddle, and dropped the reins upon the horse's neck.

The wound was bad enough, but a second piece of bad luck followed. When the reins fell on his neck, the horse's head went down; he gave a stumble, and Phelim was on the ground without much idea of how he came there.

Crippled as he was, it was not likely that he could succeed in mounting the frightened animal while under fire, and he did not attempt to follow it as it darted away. He only gripped tighter the revolver that fortunately had not dropped from the other hand, and lay still.

A shout went up at the sight of his fall. He had already made bad work, and no matter what were the original intentions of his assailants, his death was what they were now playing for.

"Bad luck to ye," he gritted between his teeth. "Oi'll make it warrum fur ye yit. Av the hounds k'ape at me it will l'ave a chance for the riht, an' av Oi don't make the teeth m'ate Oi'll dole a-troyin'."

It was then that Bowlding gave proof that he was a pard to tie to, after all. He was over the shock, and he left explanation for a more convenient season. His horse had halted like the well-trained animal that it was, and when the rustlers were shouting over their victory, he

was bearing silently down upon them from the rear. They did not discover his presence until he opened at close quarters, and his first shot made the odds disappear, and the single man that was left unhurt, ran away. At least, he drew out a little, and allowed Bowlding to sweep up to Phelim with the horse that he had captured.

"Up with you, Irish, if you are fit for the saddle," was his greeting. "We have them on the standback now and we want to get things in shape to keep them that way. There may be more of them in hearing, somewhere, but I think that we won't have much trouble if we lose no time. It's a mean trick that you served me when you left me to look out for myself without warning, and if you knew me better I would be calling you up to the captain's office to settle. Maybe, however, I would have done the same thing, and I don't feel quite so mad as I did since I have seen how you fought for the woman. It is not Myrtle Mead—who is it?"

Phelim was up and in the saddle before he had finished. His left arm was almost useless, and he could feel the warm blood trickling down toward his fingers, but there was no time to stop to bandage it. It could wait.

"Nixt toime, pard, don't be sailin' undther false colors, an' an honist mon won't be so loike-ly to susthpiet ye. It's Gladys Golden, av near Harrud Luck, that the young leddy is, an' frum phat she tells me Myrtle Mead is safe at home. An' won't there be a qu'are sensation whin the ither wan comes sailin' in to thry for her place. But is this wan hurt, or is it ownly the scare av her loife?"

"The scare and the fall together, I think. I saw no blood. When I discovered that though her face is like Myrtle's yet it belonged to some one else, and a stranger, the shock nearly knocked me down. I am ready to fight for her, all the same; and if it is true that Myrtle is back in camp I am glad that I did not sooner know it. I would never have been here, where I was needed badly enough. Ah, I see that she is moving. A moment will show how badly she is hurt."

The man kept a wary eye out for the rustlers as he spoke, but they were for the present out of the game. When their leader was unhorsed it was done with no gentle force. As he struck the plain with his head he had not joined in the pursuit at all. The others were scattered around as they were left in the fight, and those that were able were willing to haul off and repair damages.

By the time they reached Gladys, she was sitting up with her wits once more about her. As they halted at her side she struggled to her feet.

Her senses had never left her entirely since she had heard the startled exclamation given when she slipped from Ben Bowlding's arms. She looked up at him as he came again to her side, and her suspicion became a certainty.

"I know you now. You are Kemp, of Hard Luck. If you had not kept up that disguise with me it might have been better for all of us."

"You know me?"

"Only as the friend of my friend—and one whom I had some difficulty in keeping at a distance a few nights ago."

"And this is true—that it was you, and not Myrtle, whom that bound carried away?"

"Very true. As I have explained to Mr. McGallagin she was not at the Odeon at all that night. She was sick and I took her place. The rest you know. I had a hard fall, but am none the worse for it now, I think. Are we to fight or run? For I suppose you will want to get back to Hard Luck as soon as possible, since you know the truth."

"I can hardly believe it yet, though I suppose it must be true. It is too late now to try the track on the other side of the river, and I hope that the worst is over. These fellows will hardly attack us again, and if they do, have no fears for the result. We will be in Hard Luck by this time to-morrow night."

As he spoke he was bandaging Phelim's arm, and looking around, to see the animal that the Irishman had ridden from the river come trotting up. In a trice they were all three again mounted, and with faces turned toward Hard Luck were dropping their unwelcome neighbors rapidly behind them.

It was one of the neatest little fights on record, and these men who were used to such work thought it was the worst kind of a mistake that they had made when they treated the strange Irishman as Dennis, to find that he was another individual altogether, and one of the best. As for Kemp—they did not know who he was, but it was evident that there was no discount on him, either. When they took stock of losses it was found that though the dead were few, the wounded were many. It took some time to refit, and by that time the fugitives had a long start. It was doubtful if they could be overhauled before morning, even if their trail was followed.

Yet the pursuit was begun, for there was a chance that King Kennedy himself would intercept them, and it would be as well for them to be found as well on the trail as possible. Even

then it would be hard to find an excuse for what he would be apt to consider a gross blunder somewhere.

CHAPTER XXXII.

KING KENNEDY MISSES THE TURN.

SOME little time after the dude and his wife reconnoitered the humble dwelling of Miss Hazzard, a party of three approached it cautiously.

Although the street was dark and deserted, they moved as though they did not care to be seen; and moreover, as though one of them was thoroughly well tired.

That one was Gladys Golden. She rested somewhat on the arm of Bill Kemp; while on her other side walked Phelim, swaggering as jauntily as ever, though he carried one arm in a sling.

The three had distanced pursuit, and made their way straight to Hard Luck, with scarcely a pause on the route. It was no wonder if Gladys was well-nigh broken down, and Phelim feeling a great deal worse than he looked. They had turned their horses out to graze by the side of the stream at the edge of town, securing them by lariats, and then quietly sought the cabin, where Gladys expected to rest for the night.

The building looked just as deserted as it had a short time before to Auburn, but though Gladys knew that Miss Hazzard was in the habit of keeping a light burning at night, she had no suspicion that the house might be tenantless. It was time for the inmates to be sleeping, and the light might have gone out.

Kemp knocked lightly at the door. As the hotel was not far distant, he did not care to make more noise than was necessary. It would be time enough in the morning for the people of the camp to hear of the return. They desired to confer with Miss Hazzard before giving their story to the public.

No answer came to the knock, and Kemp tried again. In fact, he tried three or four times, with the same lack of result.

Gladys was surprised. She knew something of the inmates, and that they were light sleepers. When Bill applied his knuckles in a way that would have roused the seven of Cologne she uttered a warning, "Hush!"

"They cannot be there. Perhaps she has taken the alarm and left the place—perhaps even the town. We may as well give it up."

"It's more afraid Oi am that Kennedy has been gettin' in his worruk. Not a sthép do Oi move tell Oi say phat is the embarrassment. Av she has lift we can till it, an' av she's did in her bid we want to foind it out. Come with me round the corner an' wait a bit."

No one seemed to have noted their efforts, but it was as well to be on the safe side. The two followed without delay.

As there was no one to interfere with his movements, Phelim found no trouble in forcing his way into the house through the window that he found shutterless, and only half-secured.

He lit a match; and then the lamp that he found on the table. He was in the sitting-room, and found, not at all to his disappointment, that there was no one there. He approached the door that led to what he judged was the sleeping-room, and rapped.

No answer.

Then he turned the latch, opened the door and looked within the room.

On the couch lay Myrtle, sleeping heavily. She was still clothed, and appeared to have lain down to rest and fallen to sleep; but to the ear of Phelim the breathing did not seem altogether natural. And he had made noise to have broken any natural slumber. What was wrong? Where was Miss Hazzard?

The absence of the elder lady was unaccountable, but Phelim jumped at once to the conclusion that the other had been drugged; though not sufficiently to do more than produce a sound sleep, from which she could probably be roused. He went back, opened one of the doors that had a key on the inside, and called the others in.

"Something strange about it," said Gladys, when McGallagin had explained the situation. "She may be in more danger than you think. This time the attack has perhaps been made on Miss Hazzard, since no doubt the imposition that Nola intended to attempt was discovered. Let us rouse her if we can, and learn the truth."

It proved to be no easy task, and even when Myrtle opened her eyes and looked around her it was some time before she could understand who they were, and what it was that they wanted.

And then, just as they thought that she was herself once more, there came a quick, peremptory knock at the door, that caused her to start in terror, so unstrung were her nerves.

At the sound, Phelim, with a caution for silence, slipped out of the rear door. He was back by the time the knock was repeated, his finger held warningly up, to enjoin silence.

"Faith, an' it's a moighty oncertain light, but av me eyes don't dec'ave me, it's a mon much loike that same King Kennedy that you will foinde at the door. Phat will we do wid him? Sp'ake quick, for he's the koinde that don't wait long whin they want to come in."

Dandy Bill's hand stole down toward the weapons in his belt. The treacherous blow at the Odeon was neither forgotten nor forgiven.

"I will meet him," whispered Myrtle, to whom the announcement seemed to restore presence of mind and courage. "Wait! There is the key. Let me face him. You can stay in the other room. With you near I am not afraid."

Back into the bedroom slipped the three, while Myrtle threw open the door, and confronted the man who stood on the little porch, with his hand half raised as if to give another knock.

The light was not burning very brightly, and it was no wonder that the man mistook her for Nola. He only gave a careless glance; then he whispered:

"Does she sleep? Have you fixed her? There is much to arrange, or I would not have asked for this meeting. I should have been with the boys at this river before this, had I not been watching the man in the camp, who has been interfering, and is to be feared if he is a detective. I must explain everything now, since I may not see you again for a month, unless you send for me. Are you sure that the drug has worked?"

"As sure as can be," answered Myrtle, thinking of the sleep into which she had fallen, and believing now that she had taken some potion prepared for Miss Hazzard, before the tables had been turned on Nola in much the same way.

"Come in, if you choose."

He stepped over the doorway without hesitation. His voice was the voice of King Kennedy, but he was still in the garb that he wore when in the Paint Shop, a short time before.

Myrtle held up her hand warningly, as if to caution against speaking too loudly, and then motioned toward a seat.

"Rather a disreputable gentleman as to looks, eh?" he said, as he sunk into an easy-chair.

"I was on the trail of the gentleman that has been trying to pose as the eldest son of the house—and slipped up on it bad."

He pointed to his forehead as he spoke. There was a big lump there, and the skin was shaved off neatly, where the knuckles of the dude cut as they landed.

"You look the worse for wear; but there is little time to waste, if you have much to say. I do not know that there is any danger, yet I do not care to have you here longer than is necessary. So far, everything has gone so well that I begin to fear that such luck cannot last. What is it now?"

"You must get away as soon as possible from this place. It would be better if you could persuade your aunt to leave the country at once; or as soon as she has arranged all the proof needed of your identity. As long as you remain here there is danger from these detectives, who evidently know something about me, and may know as much about you. Have you had any conversation with Rhoda, as to who you are, and the fortune that is one day to be yours?"

"Not a word. It is next to impossible to lead her up to it. I doubt sometimes if she has ever heard of the death we know she has been waiting for."

"There can be no question of that, since I saw that the intelligence was sent her, myself. Have you tried to find out what she has done with the papers, with which we could move without her?"

"Tried, in a roundabout way, but it was no use. She does not suspect, but she is very cautious. I do not think that she has ever given a hint to any one, not even to—the other."

It was a strain on the imagination of Myrtle to keep up this conversation, but she wanted to find out all that she could in regard to the plans of this man, and her own hopes of future fortune. So far it seemed to her that he had been talking to her without the shadow of a suspicion.

The trouble was that she was too anxious to be able to keep up for long the reckless, bantering tone of the true Nola. Even in matters of sober business it was no easy task to bring that young lady down to the serious style into which Myrtle was unconsciously dropping.

It was this that King Kennedy suddenly thought of, when, without warning, he raised from his seat and with one stride was by the side of the girl, looking keenly in her face, while one hand grasped her wrist in a gripe of steel.

"Who is this? What is the meaning of this? Where is Myrtle Mead?" he exclaimed.

"There is some foul play here, and I am just in time to checkmate it. By heavens, the work will be done over again, and this time it will be so that there can be no coming back!"

In all his surprise he did not, after the first moment, forget his caution. His voice dropped to a whisper, he gave a quick glance behind him at the door to see that his retreat was possible, and then his arm dropped around Myrtle, and he raised her from the floor. In a moment he would have been away with her.

Just then the door to the bedroom flew open, disclosing Kemp on the threshold, a leveled revolver in his hand.

"Hold on!" rung his voice through the room.

"There's a little account to first settle with me—a coward blow at the face of a man you were calling your friend. A step before that and you are a dead man. Draw; put your hands up; or I'll take you foul!"

A knife flashed into King Kennedy's hand, and he took one step toward the speaker, whose pistol exploded without further warning.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A REPORT FROM THE TRAIL.

THE intentions of Kemp never were more strongly fixed than when he pulled the trigger of the pistol that lay on a dead level with King Kennedy's brain. He expected to see him drop to the shot, while he would spring forward and catch the almost fainting Myrtle before she struck the floor. Instead of that, the bullet wasted itself in the air; or, rather, it buried itself in the ceiling.

It was no wavering of his nerves that made the ball fly wide. As his finger tightened, Phelim, from behind, tossed up his hand, and then, under cover of the report, sprung past him, and glided between King Kennedy and the door. As he had his own weapons out and leveled it was not to give Kennedy an opportunity to escape that he had interfered.

"Dhrap it, Kennedy, dhrap it—av ye don't want to go up the flume a-bowlin'. It's little Oi wad sthoph the fun av it was not to foinde out a little more about ye afore ye dhrap out ov the wat. It's wan more chance ye have, an' thin Oi'll be riddy to shoot wid any ov them. Howld yer hands up; an' talk sinse, or bite lead! Sure, an' it's a box ye'r' in, an' can't ye say it?"

The actions of the Irishman more than his words showed what was his meaning. He wanted Kennedy to yield himself a prisoner, and give away his game, whatever it was.

Not quite ready for that was he. There was the hint that his life was an item to this man, and the rustler banked on it heavily. Of course he knew that in a question of life or death for one or the other he must go down, but as long as he made no effort to draw, it was more than likely that Phelim would make no effort to shoot. He dropped Myrtle from his arm, wheeled like lightning, and dove, feet-foremost, through the convenient window at his left, carrying sash, glass and frame along with him. He preferred thinking matters over a little before he talked with these men, and this was about the only way that he saw to procure the opportunity.

Small blame to Phelim if he was taken somewhat off of his guard. He had half-expected a savage attack on himself, and for the rest thought there might be an effort to obtain a parley, with a hope of seeing an opening. He did not believe that King Kennedy would either abandon his prisoner or retreat.

Kennedy landed on his feet. By the time that the men were starting out of the window he had vanished from view. Kennedy had recognized the fact that if he stayed there he would have to kill two men, one of whom had just saved his life, and both of whom were pretty well able to look after their own interests.

"The cur!" exclaimed Kemp, half-inclined to spring out of the window in pursuit, but turning back to look at Myrtle as he heard a faint sound from her lips.

"Not so much of a cur, perhaps, as he looks. He is only prudent. And he does not care for the looks of things so long as his own interests are advanced. He will be back again when the time comes. And no doubt he will have your life if he can take it. Ah, he is a wicked, wicked man!" murmured Myrtle. "But where is my—where is Miss Hazzard? And how comes Gladys here? I was just waking up enough to understand what you were saying when that man came. Did he follow you here, Gladys?"

"Whist, there!" interposed Phelim, looking sharply around. The call of King Kennedy, and what he had heard of the conversation fitted in so well with what Gladys had told him of Nola Norman that he began to understand the situation.

"Av Oi wor to shp'ake Oi would say that Miss Hazzard has gone out a-callin' an' taken Miss Nola along. Phat she wants to do wid her is affther phat King Kennedy will be thyrin' to foinde out. It's danger Oi say in his oye, an' he's a good mon to look affther."

"Why didn't you let me go when he was coming for me with a knife, and I had the drop on him?" asked Kemp, half-angrily. "I didn't like to pick trigger, to be sure, but it was the best I could do. By this time there would have been no more danger in him, and the wrongs of two or three women pretty thoroughly avenged."

"That's wan way av lookin' at it, but it moight not be so agrayable to some. Oi have in my moinde, whin they came to foinde out the whole story. It's meself that wants to know who King Kennedy is, before Oi say him go over the range."

"You seem to know something of us and our affairs," chimed in Myrtle. "You should know

that he has been for years the evil genius of those who were near to me by blood. It was through fear of him that she whom you know as Miss Hazzard came to this end of the earth to hide herself; and it was through him, and because of him, that all the mystery and evil connected with the Ainslie fortune has occurred. And though I hate bloodshed, if he had fallen I could not have but felt that he brought his fate upon himself.

"But for all that, I am sure that it is better so, if he works no greater harm in the future. I can forgive his attempt against me since it failed, and I am little the worse."

Gladys spoke thoughtfully, and with something like a shiver. She had felt something like this when she saw Kennedy's eyes fixed on her as she swung on the trapeze, a moment before her fall at the Odeon.

"It's better you'd be sayin' phat he's affther at this blessed minnit. Av he m'ates the leddy, he might be doin' her a harrum. Phere would Oi be findin' av her?"

Phelim had an eye to business, and did not care to get an explanation started in regard to the varied adventures of Gladys Golden. That would have suited Kemp well enough, since he would have welcomed almost any excuse to prolong the interview with Myrtle, even with the presence of the Irishman and Gladys as a handicap.

Myrtle did not care to answer—it took another and a stronger warning to open her lips. She was not certain that she had not been placed in the sound slumber in which they found her to serve some purpose of Miss Hazzard's, and what she had to say was not very definite. Had it not been that the impressive words of the Irishman had begun to awaken a feeling of alarm, she would have remained silent on the subject. At the last it was more a hint than a statement. She said that she did not believe that Nola was aware of her presence in the house, for she had been kept hidden until that evening, and that when she, her aunt, brought her out from her hiding-place, there was no trace of the intruder. Probably she had learned that she was unmasked, and taken her own departure, failing to see Kennedy to prevent his calling there. As for Miss Hazzard—she had spoken of visiting the cabin of John Golden, and it was barely possible that she had gone in that direction.

"And phere is that same John Golden?" asked Phelim, sharply, turning to Gladys. "It's a mon that Oi have not saunc, an' mebbe he's the hub ov the whole matter."

"I do not know," answered Gladys.

"He was a strange man, and though he cared for me for years, I have my doubts of his being of kin to me. A few days ago he disappeared. He has done so before, and returned all right, so that I felt no alarm. If I had thought that he had returned, I would have gone to the cabin direct. Can it be that he has fallen into the hands of this same King Kennedy?"

"There's no telling phat deviltry he's bin up to, but av Oi can foinde me owld fri'nd McGinnis, it's more we could know. Oi'm going out to the cabin anyway. Av Misther Kemp's not too busy, it's his company Oi wa'd loike ilegant well."

"Count me in with you," answered Kemp, with something of the natural swing in his voice. "That villain will scarcely dare to come back here, so that I think the young ladies are safe enough. If he should turn up, they both know how to shoot, and though he may have his beelers along with him, they can stand him off until the camp has a chance to turn out. They will all be with you at Hard Luck as soon as they know that you need backing, so that there is no occasion for alarm. Miss Golden knows that we left the most of those who aided in the abduction, in no good shape for traveling, so that he has not the force that he had on the other occasion. Good-night. We shall not interfere with Miss Hazzard, and it is as like as not that we shall not even see her, but if there is anything to tell we will return, or send you word."

He attempted no impressive leave-taking, but somehow he felt a great deal more hopeful than he had ever done before.

More time had been wasted since the disappearance of King Kennedy than they were aware of. That gentleman had obtained quite a start, and knew some things that they only suspected. Scarcely had he left the house when he came upon one of his men, who knew him in spite of his disguise, though he had not been present at the affair at the Red Paint Saloon.

As Kennedy went striding along this man uttered a low whistle, that caused him to turn at once.

"Ah, you are here, are you?" he snarled, in no good humor. "Strikes me you were put there to watch a certain house. You have been doing it? If you had been at your post when I went in it would have saved me risking the narrowest kind of a shave."

"W'ot's the use ter watch a house w'ot's nothing in it? I didn't jest understand it in that way. Bin a-keepin' track ov ther women-folks, an' that I thort would be heap better.

They ain't there, you kin bet a heap big on that."

"Perhaps they are not, and perhaps they are. I don't go much on men that can't keep where they ought to be, and when the time comes I may have something to say about it. Now, what did you see that was worth the telling?"

"Pon me soul, captain, the two women left the house long ago. The girl looked to be kind of tired like, while the old woman was about ez nigh to draggin' her along as anything else. That's what made me foller."

"Ah, and which way did she go?"

"In course I ain't jest so sure, fur I only follered tell they got good and started; but ef I ain't 'way off they war breakin' up ther bill fur John Golden's shanty. Leastwise they took ther trail thet leads that way, an' it's likely thar's whar they be goin'."

"Keep an eye on the house. It's not as empty as it looks. If an accident should happen to two men I left there I wouldn't weep; but run no risks. I guess one man would not stand much chance with them."

With this brief order Kennedy left the man on the watch and strode away in the direction indicated. He had known something of John Golden and his cabin; and the suggestion seemed to be a plausible one.

Luck was with him. When he was fairly out on the trail he came across half a dozen men who were resting the horses that in a better light would have shown the marks of hard work. He recognized them in an instant. They were of the band of rustlers that had been with him at the abduction of the girl from the Odeon.

At almost the same instant they recognized him.

Very frankly they owned up to the way in which they had lost their captive. While they were fighting at the ford, to get away with the stolen herd, the guard at the camp had been surprised. The pursuit that was made when the loss was discovered was immediate, but one of the rescuers had thrown them off by a false trail. When they got on the track at last they found that some half dozen of their pickets had a brush with the fugitives, who had ambuscaded them and beaten them off. Though they had followed the trail promptly they had never caught up, and here they were, ready for business.

"And business you shall have—follow me," said King, frowning darkly, as he led the way up the trail.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TAKEN AND TIED.

WHEN they struck down the listeners on the outside of the cabin Steve Lindsay and his pard partially got even for their discomfiture at the same spot a few days before, though they did not know who it was that they had come across until after the work was done.

It was a piece of luck on their side, anyhow. They had been approaching the cabin cautiously, with an idea of listening if they reached it unobserved. When they found the ground outside already occupied they hit out without hesitation. At least, Steve did; and as he had a fair chance at an unprotected head he tumbled Arlington over in a way that the dude had seldom experienced.

Banker went for his game after a different fashion, and was agreeably surprised at the little resistance that was offered.

Without hesitation they began to tie the wrists of the two, and while they were busy the door of the cabin opened, and Howard Bromwell appeared in the frame, holding up a lantern that cast a broad belt of light over the scene. Very fortunate it was that the original eavesdroppers were there, since the two bad men had missed learning a wrinkle or two about their employer. If they had heard the conversation with Nola they must have suspected something.

"Ah!" exclaimed Bromwell, in the tones with which they were familiar:

"Listeners, spies, villains no doubt! Tie them well and bring them in. It is unfortunate, but they must take the consequences."

It was easy enough done in the case of Arlington Auburn, since he was beyond resistance for the time. With the disguised woman it was different. She recovered her breath and her wits in an instant. Banker fumbled a little with the cord, and that gave Leona the chance she wanted. She wrenched her hands apart, slipped from under Banker's knee, sprung to her feet, and was off like a shot. It was not a very brave-looking movement, but under the circumstances she could do no better. Her escape was a reasonable guarantee for Arlington's safety; while his falling into their hands might result in learning something in regard to this queer complication.

As no one wanted to shoot until it was cleared up a little, her retreat was accomplished without danger. Banker tried his hand at a foot-race for a short distance, but finding that he was outpaced from the start, soon gave it up, and returned sulkily to the cabin.

Arlington had just been dragged inside, and Bromwell was looking him over by the light of the lantern.

"Sorry, boss," said Buck, as he entered. "I ain't built fur speed, an' ther blamed gerloot kin run like a deer. May come sneakin' back ag'in, an ef you say so I'll lay fur him. Didn't keer to shoot tell I knowed what you hed ter say. We found 'em a-listenin' here an' mounted 'em on sight. Dunno if they could hear enough ter hurt. You tell."

"Unfortunately," was the answer, thoughtfully given, "but so long as the party does not get on the trail after you leave here, there is no harm done. They have heard nothing that they do not either know or suspect. They are both detectives, from what they have said or done, and they will probably try to follow me. You need not feel concerned, and I am willing to take my chances. Are you here, ready for business?"

The two looked curiously around. They understood what was meant by "business," and were anxious to see if it was ready for them.

A young lady was crouched in the opposite corner, staring steadily at them. They could not see her features very well, but her eyes shone on them like those of a panther that was watching them from the dark. They supposed that it was Gladys Golden.

"All ready, boss, ef ther payments come in right, ez we hed it arranged. I would sooner it was a job ov cold meat, but ef you say gentle restraint, and a residence at ther cave ov despair ontill things are blowed over an' settled, that goes, all the same. But this hyar individ. What you want to do with him? Steve an' me would jest ez soon take him along. Ef we'd 'a' seen who it war outside you kin bet he wouldn't hev got off so well."

"Hush! He is coming to his senses. You had better slip a gag in his mouth, and tie something over his eyes, if you are so afraid of him."

"And better plug all two, both ears. He ain't much to talk, but he's ther deuce an' all to hear. It would be cheaper to give him another belt."

"Do as you are told," was the frowning answer. "When you are gone I wish to have some talk with him. When you get back from your excursion you can talk with him yourself, if you want to. The arrangements all stand as when last spoken of. The friends of this young lady attempted to send Myrtle Mead to the Southwest. I propose to send her to the Southeast. When she has rusticated for a month she is welcome to come back to Hard Luck and play at the Odeon if she wants to; or make all the hullabaloo that she can. It is only intended to be a temporary arrangement, and by that time its ends will have been served, and she can do no more damage."

"Jest ez you say. When pard and me chips into a game we don't pull out until some one goes dead broke. We're yourn—when we git ther next payment."

"There it is. Count it and go."

Into his hand dropped a package, that opening show several bills of large denominations. It was the price of their work, and looking it over Banker handed his share to Steve, who had been silent from the start.

They stepped toward the girl, but at a motion from Bromwell she rose to her feet.

"I will go," she said firmly. "I am powerless, and I would sooner be anywhere else, so that it is out of your presence. It will not be very long until all this will be made even, and when that time comes there will be less talk, and a great deal more blood."

With that she closed her lips resolutely, and with one of the ruffians on either side moved on, out of the cabin. The two knew the way well enough, and did not need the lantern to light the path.

"It's paying him back in his own coin," was the muttered soliloquy of Bromwell, as the steps died away. It might be better to invent something new, but there will be time enough for that after a while. So far, it is simply doing what he wanted to do. Now, if this fool has any brains at all it may be as well to find out what he really knows. Of course he is in search of the Ainslie heir: but to what end? What does the hopeful scion of the younger side of the house intend to do? By the agreement he should have been here before this. It looks as though they intend to find some loophole if they can. This young man is certainly not the young duke, and if they had not had an idea of some foul play he would not have been brought into what begins to look very much like a game of some kind. Perhaps it would have been better all around if we had all acted fairly with one another. If I could be certain that they were not in league with him I might have acted differently; but when they refused to trust me what else could I do?"

When he looked again at the prisoner he saw that his wits, such as they were, were all about him, and that he was regarding him with a speculative eye, that under such circumstances must belong to a remarkably cool young man.

"Why don't you speak the truth and be done with it?"

Bromwell turned on Arlington, with a frown, and asked the question harshly. He was balancing a pistol in his hand as though he only doubted a little of the expediency of using it.

"If you are searching for the true heir to the Ainslie millions, as you have given me reason by your actions to believe, you must have seen that Myrtle Mead and her friends were the proper persons to go to for information, and that they were making a life and death fight against the most unscrupulous of enemies and pretenders. Explain your actions, then. At this stage of the affair there can be no foolishness, and no hesitation. Even a life more or less—and I have always hesitated to take life—cannot be allowed to weigh in the balance. If you are on King Kennedy's side say so. It cannot harm you now if you tell the truth; while a lie may be your death. What have you to say? Speak!"

"Aw, disgusting, doan'chaw know!"

True to his cue Auburn gasped out his view of things, and as usual hit the mark. Disgusting it was—all around.

"And that is all that you have to say when the success or failure of your mission is at stake, and perhaps your very life, besides. Well, you cannot say that you have not had a chance to speak. It must be that you are on the other side. I am done with you. You will have to remain here as you are. Doubtless your friend will come back and release you. If not, you will have a weary wait. Good-night."

Arlington Auburn congratulated himself that it was not into the hands of the Kennedy faction that he had fallen. It was very lonesome and uncomfortable here, now that he was left alone in the darkness, but that did no harm. He had no doubt that Leona would be back in a few moments; and meantime things were favorable for reflecting over what he had seen and heard.

There was one thing patent. Miss Hazzard, whoever she might be, had the ability to produce the proofs of the heirship of the girl whom she put forward.

Perhaps she was not as blind as she had seemed. It would be no easy matter to substitute either of the two girls whom he began to think had been in training to take the place of the rightful daughter of Hugh Richmond. But which that was did not seem as plain as it did just after the raid of the rustlers at the Odeon. Perhaps none of them knew—it would be strange if he only had the clew.

While he was thinking he heard at some little distance the sound of a shot, and then the cry of a woman. After that there were voices, and the hard thud of horses' hoofs. Something was going on not far away, and he was trying fiercely to release himself when he heard the light sound of a woman's steps nearing the cabin at a run.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SEVERAL STRANGE SURPRISES.

STEVE and his pards were very good men for all wickedness, provided they had some one to hold them to their work, or were doing it for themselves. But they were of the kind that were apt to sell out to the highest bidder, when they thought they could do so without too much danger to themselves.

When Howard Bromwell was talking to them, and the drop was on them, they did not care to squirm; and they had no idea of attempting anything like treachery. They were too positively afraid of him as long as they were within the limits of Hard Luck.

Outside of the camp was a different matter; and the job that they had was one that was not at all to their liking. The girl was positively not to be hurt, but was to be conveyed as a prisoner to a distant camp, and there turned over to a confederate of Bromwell's—or turned loose—while they were to get out of the road after that to suit themselves.

If it had been simply to cut the throat of their prisoner, they would probably have done it without much hesitation; but there was an element of uncertainty about their getting a further reward, if they got back and proved their work had been well done, that made the several weeks they were in for seem irksome. They were hardly out of hearing when Steve halted.

"Thar's bin big money in this, an' I allowed we'd go through it frum start ter finish; but I've bin thinkin'. What's ther matter with turnin' her loose an' jumpin' ther camp? Reckon we got about all we kin out ov ther racket, an' it's time ter be lookin' out fur ourselves."

"An' s'posin' that's jest what this Bromwell's lookin' fur us ter do? I don't ketch on yet; but it 'pears ter me that he thinks we'll do about that same thing. Ef so, s'posin' we don't?"

"What yer goin' ter do, then?"

"What's ther matter with turnin' her over ter King Kennedy? Bet a dollar he will be givin' rocks ter put his eyes on her—an' Bromwell are worked out. Ter say nothin' ov ther fact that I'd pull on him too quick ef I hed ther chance, an' were sure thet I'd git thar."

"That's talk. Guess we won't be kerryin' her round while we look fur him. It may take a leetle time to roust him out, though I know he war 'round lately."

"That head ov yourn bez somethin' in it. One ov us kin jest tote her over to ther old 'Hog Back Tunnel,' an' keep her thar, while the

other looks 'round fur a chance ter sell ther goods. Ef there's nothin' in it, thar's jest as good a spot there to start frum as we kin find anywhar southeast."

"All right. Mebbe that's what he looked fur too. Fur me, I don't keer how yer fix it so we git away with the boodle we hev. I'll go over to ther tunnel, an' you kin scout 'round. Ef you don't turn up by ter-morrer, I'll cut loose, an' go it on my own hook."

"Agreed. Look after ther gal, sharp. Ef she got away while I war in town, it might make me climb a tree. That man put a kinder a spell on her; but that won't last long, an' ef you give her a chance, she will be a heap ov trouble. I hev ther best ov ther job, an' it ain't ther sweetest thing I know of, neither."

Then they separated, and Buck started on his mission.

Lindsay waited a little, until his steps had died away in the distance, and then gathered himself up for business. In a moment he would have been on the move.

Instead of that, when the moment had expired Steve was on the ground, his senses pretty fairly scattered by the butt of a derringer that had been applied to his head by an unseen hand; while Nola, taking advantage of the opportunity, as it was intended that she should, was darting away, without any fair idea of anything but leaving the spot behind.

Buck had started on his mission in the nick of time. If he had lingered a little longer discussing matters Leona would probably have tried the other end of her weapon, and the result would have been permanent. Nor would he have been just in time to be halted by the squad of men that suddenly appeared across his path before he had gone any great distance.

"Easy, man! There is no one going to hurt you if you are on the square," said one of this party, as Buck tried to slyly draw his revolver before answering the challenge.

"We want to see who is wandering around these preserves. If you are an honest man, and can show a clean clearance, you can go on your way rejoicing."

There was something about the voice that was familiar, and though he left his hand in easy reaching distance of his weapons, Buck strode forward without hesitation.

"Bet you a dollar you are just the man I was lookin' fur," was his cool utterance, as he looked up into the face of his challenger, trying to catch a glimpse of his features.

"You're one of the parties that has taken a hand in the game that's going on hyer, an' ef your sort is the kind I think it is you are good fur a stake fur ther man an' his pard that runs a reesk ter give you a pointer—an' mebbe somethin' more."

"Right you are! And we sometimes give a bird that can sing and won't sing something that is neither taffy nor plum pudding. Talk quick if you have anything to say. You begun it, and if you have been trying any zig zag game so much the worse for you. If you tell me anything I want to know I will give you what it is worth—and if you don't open down to bed-rock inside of half a minute, I'll hang you from the nearest tree. Mind, slips don't go over. If you don't tell the truth at the jump, and try to straighten it up afterward, you hang, all the same. That's business. Now drive on with your rat-catching; The half minute has begun."

King Kennedy drew out his watch and lit a cigar, consulting the dial by the flame of the match at the outset of the operation.

Buck saw that the drop was on him from all sides, and he talked very straight. In half a minute he conveyed a good deal of information, and was resting for Kennedy to get his questions ready. He told the truth as he knew it, and Kennedy suspected the truth as it was—without blaming the man for willful prevarication. A word or two of question in regard to the spot where he had left Lindsay and the prisoner, then he was ready to move forward. Five minutes had not elapsed since Buck Banker started out to hunt for King Kennedy; and here he was, returning with the man, who had almost drifted to the spot already.

Kennedy's first object was to overtake Lindsay; but as the Holden cabin was known to some of his men, he sent two of them in that direction, with a roving commission. They might find this Howard Bromwell, of whom he knew but little; and if they got their hands on the Dude Detective, so much the better.

Scarcely had the parties separated when the two men caught sight of Leona. Whether it was man or woman was more than they could tell by that light, and when they called to her to halt she ran the faster. A bullet, sent more for a signal than to do harm, went humming over her head just as she darted out of sight. Almost breathless she darted into the cabin, calling for Auburn as she came. To find him, cut loose the cords that held him and feel him spring to his feet, was the work of a minute, but in that minute the men were at the door. Something had been going on behind them, but they paid no attention to it. Their game was here.

With Leona and her husband there was but

scant time to make up their minds whether it was to be fight or flight, and they promptly chose the latter. They were out through the shutterless window in the rear of the shanty before the men had finished the summons to surrender, which they were prudent enough to make before rushing pell-mell into the building they were almost certain contained the person of whom they were in chase.

Before the search inside was finished King Kennedy joined them. He brought with him Nola; and he was listening to the strange story that she had to tell him. Buck Banker had told him of Howard Bromwell; but when Nola assured him that the man was no other than Miss Hazzard in disguise he was more than surprised. He refused to believe.

"I know the woman too well. I can tell to the day when she lost her eyes. It is some one else who is helping her to play the game out. Yet who can he be? Some one who knows you well, and who has more than a money interest in it. But, man or woman, whoever he may be, we hunt him down. You have not lived in her home for nothing if you have learned that she no longer holds the papers that I thought dearer to her than her life. Her teeth are drawn until she gets them again in her possession. And meantime you have as good a fighting chance as any one. Better for her if this last stroke against you had been left alone. I will have such recompense as she does not dream of. But first, let us see what the boys have holed here. If it is that infernal Dude Detective you can bet that I will find a way to make him talk."

The dude, however, had slipped out, as the reader knows, and the cabin was tenantless of every one but the searchers, who were about to turn their attention to the outside.

"One minute," he exclaimed. "Let us take one glance around. We may see something that will give us a clue. If they are not here now it will be of no use to attempt pursuit, since chance only could find them, with the start they seem to have."

He lit a wax match as he spoke, and stepped inside of the door, holding the little taper up to peer around in the shadows. While he lingered, with the match at last spluttering in his fingers, a stronger gleam of light shot across the floor, and turning to see what was the cause of it, he found himself face to face with Miss Hazzard, in whose hand was the lighted lantern that she had held here not so very long ago. She had been lurking near—she had watched King Kennedy's approach—and now returned for business.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

"It is time, King Kennedy, that we met," said Miss Hazzard, as she stepped firmly into the cabin.

"For years I have heard of you, caught glimpses of you in the distance, and known that you were willing and anxious to harm still further the woman whose life you had already wrecked. You have been even more cowardly than the man whose name I refused to bear. He was willing to desert a woman to save, as he thought, his own worthless neck; but, he never struck her from the dark, even when by your own foul conduct you had given him reason to believe that he would have had some excuse. I have showed you how easily I could checkmate your game; I have left the daughter of Hugh Richmond in safety, and by to-morrow morning she will be so fortified by friends and proof that there will be no danger from you and your plots. As for me, I am tired of life, and I have come to demand my chance of vengeance. You have not been a coward with men, however, you have acted when there was a woman in the case. I tell you, King Kennedy, give me my chance for vengeance. I demand it!"

The woman was flaming with wrath. She turned on him the orbs of her sightless eyes as though they might pierce the gloom that lay between them. Her one hand held the lantern high, so that its rays fell full upon her own face, leaving the man she addressed in the shadow, while her other hand held a revolver that as if by instinct was pointed straight at him. If her eyesight was gone there was no question about the trained acuteness of her hearing. Had she pulled the trigger just then, it would have been to satisfy that vengeance for which she clamored, with his life.

The rustler captain stared at the woman, and for the first time his eyes fell upon her face so closely that he could read every line that was written there. In the light of what she had just said, raving though he had deemed it, as he listened, the face was a revelation. Something of the jaunty look left his own face as he cowered back, his fingers closing on the wrist of Nola until she gave a low cry of pain. Then, between his set lips, he muttered:

"Heavens, girl! It is not Rhoda! It is Rhea Wilder herself—Hugh Richmond's unfortunate wife."

"Yes, King Kennedy, it is the woman whom you surrounded with the net-work of your snares; and when she broke through them all

you murdered her name, so that when weak, foolish, sinful Hugh Richmond came in search of his wife, he found her dead to him as thoroughly as though she was beyond the portals of the tomb. Oh! if I could only see you cringe as you look at the woman you have wronged beyond pardon! I had to die to escape you; and then you slew the husband that called you out for a different cause than the crimes he knew not of. Perhaps he deserved his death—but not at your hands. It is another count in the indictment that is read to you now by one who comes, as it were, from the dead."

Her bitter words seemed only to bring back to the man his natural effrontery.

"And so, for years you have been hiding under your sister's stage name! What have you done with her? Murdered her, perhaps. There never was anything good in the whole family; and you would slaughter your own child, if it served your ends."

"Her sister is here!"

From somewhere outside in the darkness the speaker slipped to Miss Hazzard's side. The voice was that of a woman, but the figure was that of Howard Bromwell! A number of years seemed to have lifted from the shoulders of the old man, and the illusion was over. No one would have seen anything but a woman in the masculine garb.

"To save her, I gave up my own name and personality. It was better than a disguise—for you knew something of me. I would never have endured for an hour your persecutions. I would have hunted you down, and killed you at the altar itself, if you had taken refuge there. Will you give her the satisfaction that she demands, or shall we slay you where you stand?"

"How brave we are!" mocked Kennedy. "It is a duel that you propose, if I understand you aright. Between a man like myself, that shoots a perfect string, and a woman that is blind, that would be very much like what the world calls murder. The truth is, we are all mad together—if I was the only sane one of the lot I would say, Let the duel go on."

"If you do not say the word, you shall die where you stand. It is only a chance for your life that I offer."

"I have heard of blind men who could shoot at a sound, but I take little stock in the trick. And the boys—who have been standing out at a sign from me—would take a hand in, too quick, if they saw me go down. Very bad boys we cattle-thieves and rustlers can be—not at all the kind of fellows that you ladies would care to attempt to bluff, if you saw them with their angry passions on to the limit. But I acknowledge that the lady has something to complain of, and—well, she may call for the best that I have in the shop. I can, at least, find out what is her vanity, and if I see that she is not too altogether bent on throwing her life away, I may be willing to hand it down. Had I known sooner who she was, I might have played my game differently; but it is now too late to cry over the spilt milk of the years that are past. The boys will see fair play—and bury the survivor."

It was hard to tell, even yet, whether he was taking the proposal in sober earnest, or whether he was making a mock of her helplessness. If he was doing the latter, there was one there who thought that he was making a mistake, and that was Buck Banker.

He did not care so much for the woman that was blind as he did for the woman who wore the clothing of a man, and backed her game with so heavy a hand.

"I might have knowned it," he muttered to himself, when the development was made that pronounced her sex. "Nobody but a woman would have played a hand after that style—but she is a woman to kill, all the same. She knows me and Steve from the ground up, and will have it in for us, big as a whale. Steve don't show up, and I'll bet the boodle that we made on the game that he has started to run already, and won't pull up this side of a thousand mile. Reckon Kennedy don't want her bad, and the safest thing for me to do would be to throw her cold while they are not looking, and then climb out. I don't think they would chase me very hard. If I don't, I'm dead meat, and that's a fact."

So reasoned Buck Banker, to whom his treachery began to look even worse than it was; and from his corner of the room, where he crouched near to the open window, he had, as he thought, an elegant chance to fire and get away.

His hand drew the weapon, his finger was on the trigger while his thumb was trying to noiselessly draw back the hammer. He was so engaged in his work that he did not hear the voice of his late employer, though, to tell the truth, it was pitched at a key that barely reached the ears of King Kennedy.

"A moment, please. Pardon the interruption, but a friend of mine is trying to make it interesting, and it is necessary to send him to his place. He should know better, but fools will have sore heads, and—"

Buck seemed to see a flash of lightning just then, his finger dropped away from the trigger, and he curled up on the floor, without further

interest in the proceedings. He didn't get up again, of his own accord, for a month.

At the report, explained beforehand though it had been, Kennedy started, yet he waited for an answer to his little speech before he would move. When Banker went down the blind woman went on as coldly as though there had been no interruption.

"There are ways of making those that are blind equal with those that see. I could strike you where you stand, so I heard your voice a moment before; but there is a surer way. Take the loads from one pistol, and place a loaded one by its side. Take your choice, and we will stand breast to breast. Then, when the word is given, fate will leave standing the one whom fate loves. Or, if there is any justice in the heavens, my wrongs will be avenged. Dare you face me thus; or are you the cringing coward that I always thought you, if once driven to the wall?"

Kennedy looked at the woman, whose face still flamed at him in the glare of the lamp. There was nothing but deadly earnestness there. If it had been a man he would not have hesitated. But it was a woman—and this woman, whom he had wronged even worse than she knew—how could he slay her, or how could he die at her hands? He hesitated—but it was only for a moment.

Then he straightened himself up as he made his resolve.

"It is folly to pit my life against yours, but a man must be a fool once in his life. You have told the truth when you stated your case, and I owe you all that you claim. No man has ever yet said with truth that King Kennedy did not pay his debts; and I will not let this one go to protest. Arrange it to suit yourself, and the boys shall see that I treat you fairly. It shall be a field of honor, from which, as usual, one shall go away with regrets. It is in your hands. Prepare your weapons."

The men had received their caution beforehand that he alone was to deal with this woman, and they were obeying to the letter. They stood back silent and wondering while all this was going on, nor once attempted by word or act to interfere. The woman in male garb produced the weapons, and handled them like one who knew well their uses. From the cylinder of one she drew the cartridges, and then handed it to Kennedy to return the empty cylinder to its place.

Then she turned her back to him while she covered the pistols with the skirt of her coat.

"Take one," she said, briefly, as she stood in front of him. "You will fire at the word 'three.'"

"Ready!" she said, as the two stood with weaponed hands, and in the shadows the two hands went up until the two muzzles rested, each upon a breast.

Then nothing was to be heard but the hard breathing of those in the little cabin.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE GRAND REVELATION.

"ONE," coldly counted Rhoda.

"Two."

Then:

"Aw, weally disgusting, doan'chaw know?" drawled Arlington Auburn, while, at the same time, Phelim, springing through the window, caught a wrist in either hand, and forced the leveled revolvers upward until they pointed toward the roof.

"Be aisy wan howly minnit, an' listin to sinse. Thin, av ye must, shoot, an' be hanged wid ye! An' av ye don't listen, Oi'll arrist ye, Hugh Richmond, or whativever ye call yerself, for the murder ov Colonel Coldstr'ame, av Oi doie for it. D' yez think Oi haven't got ye down foine? It's phat Oi'm here for, an' Phelim McGallagin always does his duty."

A snarling curse fell from the lips of the rustler captain as he swung himself loose from the hand of the Irishman, and then the revolver dropped into line, and the hammer fell. Had there been a cartridge under it, Phelim would have never spoken another word.

"There, bad luck to yez, av ye won't talk to the mon phat has just saved your loife, ye ought to go out ov the damp, an' it's McGallagin that f'ales as though he wad loike to sind ye on the journey. Will ye listin? Av me pard was as glimflasy as you, he wad have had ye down by this. But don't draw anither. An' look afther the leddy a little. Can't ye say that she's fainted?"

Altogether, there were reasons enough to make the captain pause. He recognized that but for the interruption he would by this time have been a corpse. And here was Arlington, handling a weapon as though he was perfectly competent to use it, and Rhea Wilder was in a motionless heap on the floor.

He cast the useless weapon away from him, folded his arms, and stood silent, watching Rhoda raise the head of her sister from the floor.

After all, it was only a momentary faintness. The woman gasped once or twice, and turned her sightless eyes toward the spot where the captain had been standing. In another moment

she had gathered strength, and was slowly rising to her feet.

"Is it true?" she asked in a sharp whisper.

"Can it be true? If this man is Hugh Richmond, then, where is King Kennedy?"

"In the grave, where I planted him," retorted the man, with a harsh laugh. "We may be very worthless, some of us; but when a man wrongs us as he did, or tried to, he never escapes. The only wonder is that, with the belief I had, you are not lying beside him. If I could have found you, I suppose that is where you would be. And until to-night I never suspected how I had wronged you. Well, it is worth something to have lived long enough to have found out. I did think that I would get a hand in the coffers that ought to be mine; and while I had suspicions that King Kennedy had left a daughter behind, I did not intend that she should ever enjoy them. I see now that I have been a fool all along. Have it to suit yourself. Nola and I will not cross your path again. Only one question—that you may answer or not, as you choose: Have I a daughter? and if so, which is she? There are a pair of them, looking as much alike as two peas from the same pod. I would take Myrtle for choice; but this Gladys Golden has all the ear-marks of the family."

"And well she may, since the girls are twins. Had you come, as you promised, that would have been the pleasing surprise for you. When you vanished, it remained our secret, lest it might defeat the bargain you had made with your brother."

"Twins? Heaven forgive us! And heaven have mercy on the young duke, if he marries them both! For it's the only way out of the mess that I see."

"Faith, an' the young duke has gone where they don't marry, or naden a wife or a pig. He's did, rist his sowl! Av ye don't come home, an' begin loife over, it's the name will dole wid ye. That foolishness about Coldstrame can all be settled, av it ain't forgot, an' yez can live comfortable as ye plaze, where yer titles don't altogether rist on yer pistols."

"Ahem. I'm afraid the sacrifice would be too great. I have got fairly used to this sort of living, and if I had not been trying to kick the corpse of the King Kennedy, whose name I have been rolling in the dirt, I should hardly have interfered in the matter of the Ainslie millions. That's enough for to-night. You can all march off with banners flying, and talk it over among yourselves. I don't know how you came to find out who I was, but I don't bear any bad will. You two detectives make a fair team, and such things belong to your business. I bear no malice. I would like to see you again, and hear the latest intelligence from the family; but, upon the whole, I think I prefer to stay here and steal cattle. Rhea has her papers in shape, and the two daughters can go with her and represent the family. I expected to kill you all before the night was over, but I believe now that I won't. Good-night, all. After me, boys! The work here is done."

Then the rustler stalked away, leaving the little party there to find their way back to Hard Luck without molestation.

The duke—who, after all, was the real duke—did not change his mind. He saw the Irish detective again, as he had said, and talked matters over, but for the present refused to come to life, even to enjoy the Ainslie millions. There was nothing to hinder the personal property going to his children, and that was all they needed. He was sorry for his wife; sorry that he had not understood her better and trusted her more when everything seemed to show that she had eloped with her old admirer. Now it was too late for them ever to come together again with any hope of happiness, and he did not propose to try it. He did not care to hear any explanations in regard to her past; he thought everything was right enough, and had showed it by being willing to give her any satisfaction that she demanded, for he had firmly determined not to pull trigger when they stood face to face in the interrupted duel. As for his plot, it was the easiest way that he had thought of to reach the millions without disclosing himself. He did not intend to harm the girl, and he believed that Gladys would vouch for it that she was treated with all due respect. The only wonderful thing about it was that the women had been able to find out his plan, and so completely baffle it. Or was it simply luck that threw Gladys into his hands instead of Myrtle?

That was the substance of all that he said. He did not see his wife again, but took his departure very quietly. If any one had looked for him shortly thereafter at the Dark Moon Crossing they would not have been disappointed.

And for the rest, what more can be said? The Irish detective had fulfilled his mission thoroughly, and when he returned to his employers who were of the family of the younger brother, he took with him the four ladies and abundant proof of all that he had to aver. He had served every one well, and was abundantly rewarded.

Arlington Auburn had to settle with his wife for not having told her exactly a straight

story about his co-worker; but, as his fee was far in advance of what she had expected, she was easily mollified when he showed her that there was a certain line, and its alternative agreed on, from which he dared not deviate, even with her.

And as to the characters that Rhoda—who for years had been devoted to the interests of her sister—had played, it was not so hard to explain them. In her time she had been a woman of many parts. That came in handy when she desired to keep the relationship of the two girls and her identity unknown. From the first she had intended to use Lindsay and his pard against Nola. As John Golden she was a widely different person from the Howard Bromwell who fell over the edge of the barranca, and before the two detectives he kept up the deceit which was not discovered by Gladys at once since she had never before seen her aunt in that garb. When Phelim and the dude had vanished she was not long in finding out the truth.

William Kemp, Esquire, made a European trip about the time that Miss Hazzard withdrew her niece from the stage at the Odeon. He found that what Gladys said was not exactly in line with what Myrtle thought, and he did not entirely lose hope, even with the daughter of a duke. He was rapidly running to waste in Hard Luck, and was capable of vastly better things. They speak of him yet, in that rattling burg, and a regret, to this day, is expressed that he could not have remained with them until Snapshot Sam arrived to take the town. It is generally conceded that the result might have been different.

As for the rest—what use to particularize. Arlington Auburn still sees some things that are "weally disgusting" in his detective experience, but meets with peculiar success. Buckle still runs the Odeon, and Hard Luck flourishes in spite of its name. A king-pin of the rustlers was shot not long since, in a dashing cattle raid; but, whether the duke has really shuffled off this mortal coil, or was simply dropping out of sight to undergo another transformation, was more than Auburn when he heard it, could decide, without going over the ground.

Perhaps the raider chief may again be heard from, at home or abroad, but for the present he is still "a duke in the desert," and supposed to be the leader of the "Men of the Moon."

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